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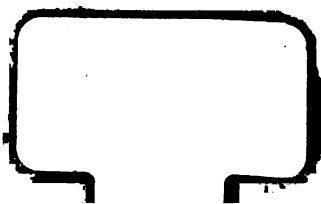
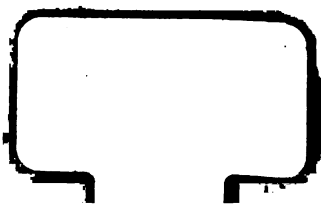
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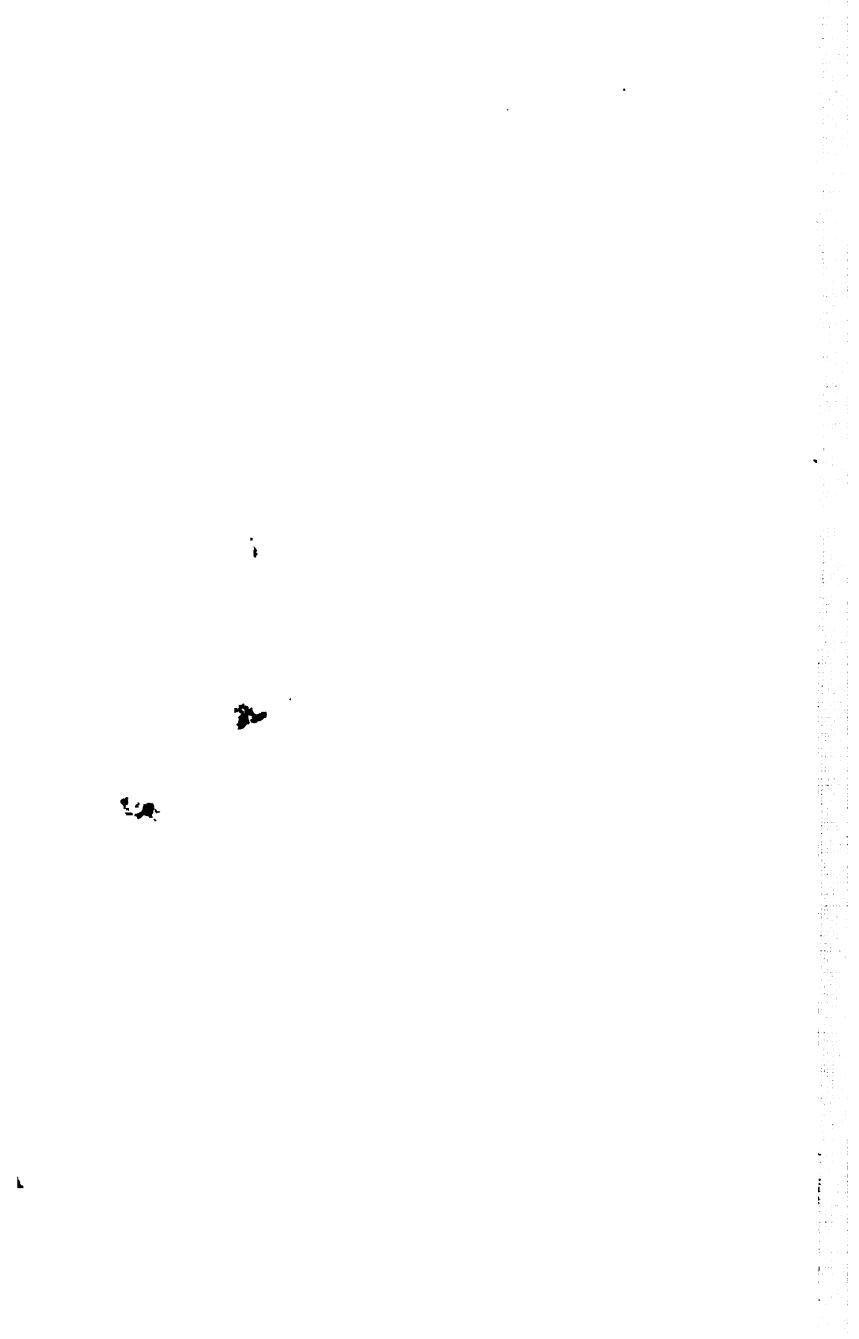
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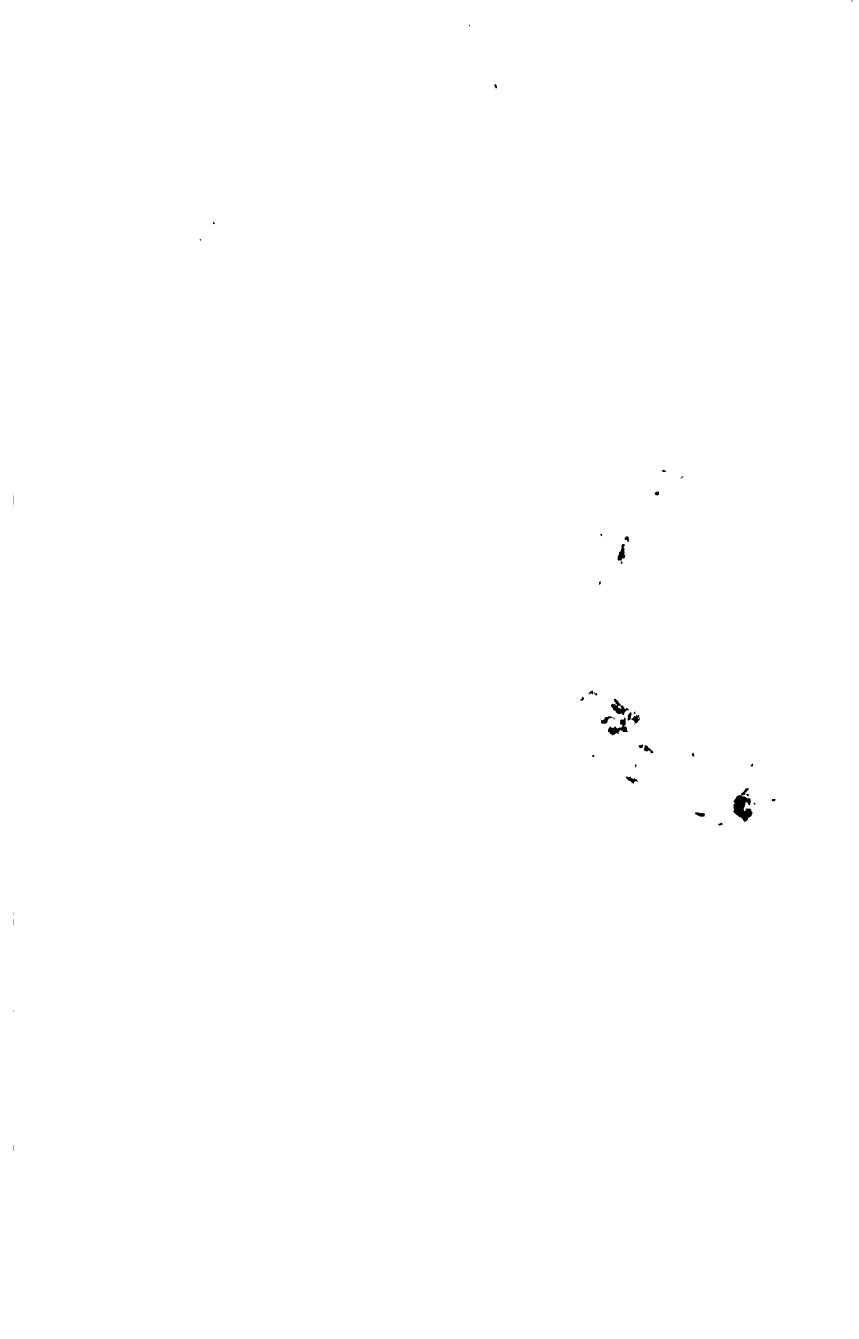


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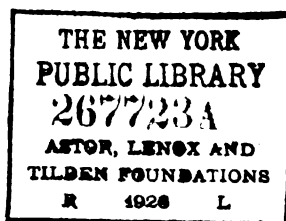
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Author of "The Crimson Alibi,"
"Polished Ebony," etc.



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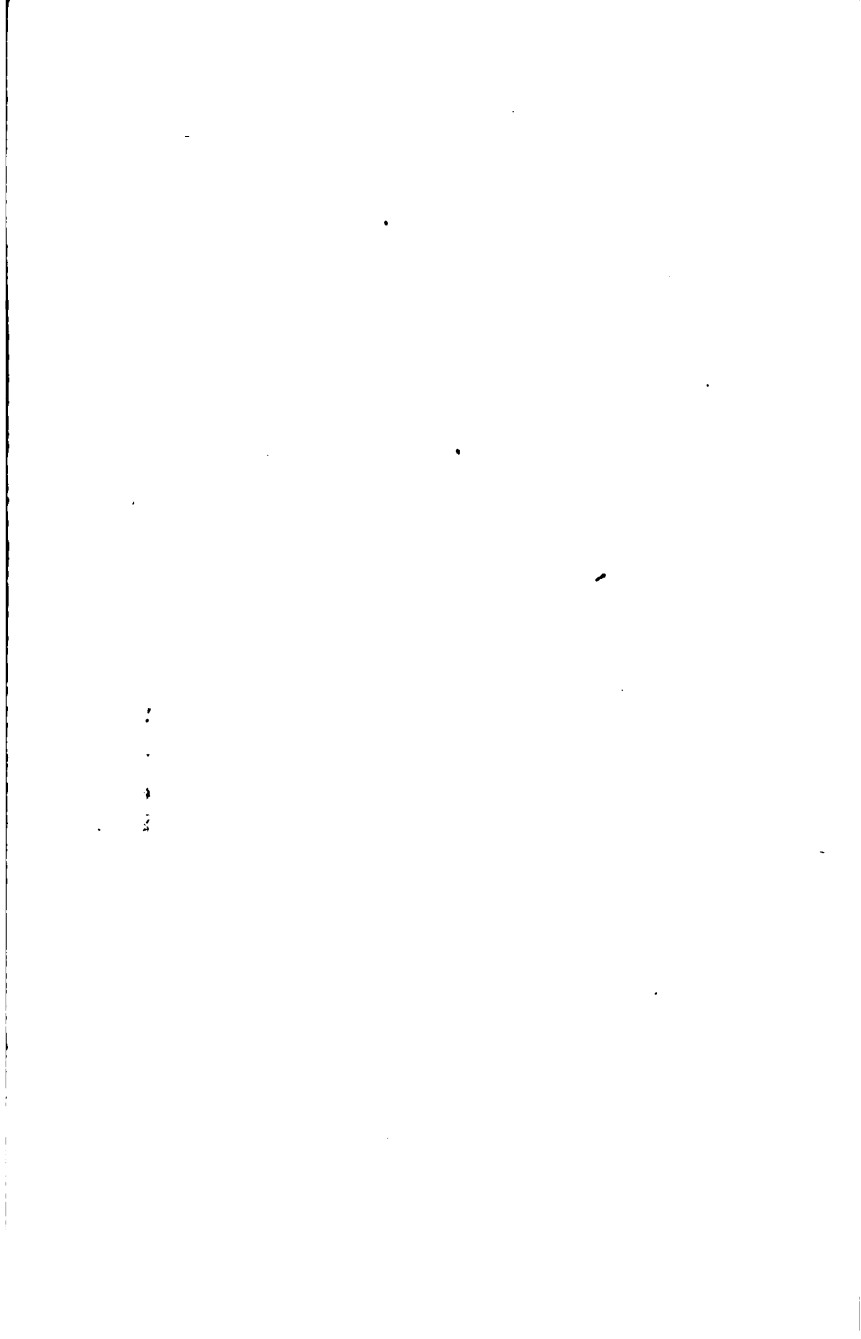


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TO
MY FRIEND
ARTHUR N. HERMAN

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GRAY DUSK



GRAY DUSK

CHAPTER I

DAVID CARROLL felt suddenly ill. A mist swam momentarily before his eyes, dimming the small sheet of yellow paper which had so affected him. He passed his right hand across his forehead and bent to re-read the neatly typed telegram:

Karnak, South Carolina
October Ninth.

David Carroll
Berkley City

Mary killed. I have been arrested.
In jail at Karnak. Need you immediately as friend and detective. Wire.
STANFORD FORREST.

The message had completely robbed David Carroll of his poise. In all his years of successful crime investigation he had never experienced such a sense of personal horror as gripped him when the import of the telegram

impressed itself on his mind. He had hitherto been secretly rather proud of his ability to view everything from an impersonal and judicial angle. Yet here, in a second, that boast was negatived.

Mary Carmody—Mary Forrest now—a bride of three days, murdered. Stanford Forrest, lifelong friend and school chum, arrested for the crime. The thing was inconceivable even to a brain trained to the socially abnormal. Why it had been only a few days before that Carroll had stood at the chancel with this man and woman, best man at their wedding; carefree and boyish in leading the matrimonial pranks which have become almost a ceremonial of affection.

And now—

He lifted the combination telephone instrument and called the telegraph company. "Take this message," he snapped and as the operator answered "Ready" he dictated:

"Stanford Forrest, Jail, Karnak, South Carolina—got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Telegram received. Leave on next train. Keep a stiff upper lip. Sign it 'Carroll.' "

He placed the instrument on its stand and looked up to meet the troubled gaze of Freda, his Scandinavian maid-of-all-work.

"Ay hope it ain't bane any great trouble, Mr. Carroll."

"It is, Freda. Very great. I want you to pack my suitcase immediately."

The girl turned away, paused with her hand on the knob and shook her flaxen hair apologetically. "Ay ain't intend to listen, Mr. Carroll, but didn't ay hear you mention Mr. Forrest?"

Mr. Carroll read the telegram to her. The girl fell back a step—horror and unbelief written large on her comely features. "Oh! It ain't bane true. It ain't bane true, Mr. Carroll."

"I'm afraid it is, Freda. This message was filed in Karnak last night, didn't get here until this morning. But it's pretty definite. Pack my suitcase. And remember—not a word to any one."

The girl nodded and left the room, mumbling to herself. She understood what her master felt. His best friend arrested for the murder of his bride—as pretty a girl as had ever come

to Berkley City. Scarcely knowing what she did, she commenced her task of packing; a not unusual procedure. Mr. Carroll was quite given to chasing about the country on his queer missions of righting criminal wrongs, of wading through conflicting evidence to a correct solution. But here was a task which she knew would try him to the utmost, because for the first time in his career the personal element bade fair to warp his cold, analytic judgment.

Meanwhile Carroll had called the number of his assistant's boarding house and the cool, quiet voice of Jim Sullivan came back to him over the wire: "Yes, Chief? This is Sullivan."

"Pack your suitcase. We're leaving for South Carolina in two hours. Get here as quick as a taxi will bring you—with your luggage."

Sullivan asked no questions. And while he waited Carroll lighted a big cigar, forgetting his untouched breakfast as he gave himself over to a chain of thought which had to do with the tragic couple in South Carolina.

The very idea of suspecting Stanford Forrest of murder was absurd,—that he would kill his

bride was beyond a comprehension learned in the psychic twist of minds so warped as to be driven to the deliberate taking of life.

In the first place Carroll knew Stanford Forrest as it is given to no man to know other than his friend of years. They had grown up together, gone through school and college together, shared joys and tribulations of boyhood and adolescence. They had confided their innermost thoughts to one another since the days when they had played together in rompers under the care of their nurses . . . and to David Carroll had come the first confidence of the budding of his chum's mature, uplifting love for Mary Carmody.

Carroll didn't blame his friend. Mary Carmody had been charming since her eleventh year when her family moved to Berkley City and the boys first made her acquaintance. As a little girl she had been gawky and awkward—and, as is usually the case—she had filled out the angles and blossomed into perfect womanhood.

Later she had left Berkley City while Carroll and Forrest were at college together and the next thing they heard she had gone on the

stage—a little stock company somewhere and from that into a small musical comedy part. Still later she had risen in the profession, to finally forsake the legitimate stage in favor of vaudeville.

It was as a vaudeville headliner that Mary Carmody had revisited Berkley City for the first time in six years, and it was then that Stanford Forrest had found her good to look upon. Thus had matters gone on for three years; years during which she toured the country from Bangor to Galveston, Washington to San Francisco; ripening in her magnificent beauty, retaining her simple sweetness, losing none of her charm and eternal optimism; preparing herself with world-knowledge for the day when she would give herself to the man of her choice.

Forrest and Mary had become engaged: only David Carroll and the immediate families knew of it. And so only David Carroll and the families knew when the inevitable lovers' quarrel developed and the engagement was broken.

As usual there had been a third person in the affair, this time an extremely handsome and none too scrupulous bucketshop operator of

New York: Bennet Hemingway by name. He was a man of engaging personality, a man who had made a most excellent living by his wits in connection with a code of honor none too rigid.

Bennet Hemingway, it seemed, had financed a pretentious act for Mary Carmody, and while he reaped a good financial harvest Stanford Forrest had known that was not his sole objective and so he remonstrated with the girl. His great love for her justified his jealousy, if there is such a thing as justification for the green-eyed monster; but they had steered their craft to the rocks and seen it founder.

Principally through Carroll's efforts, the bark had been salvaged, and they became re-engaged—happier, and more jealous of their happiness, because of the very danger to which it had been exposed. Three days ago, after a second engagement lasting nearly a year, they had been married; a great event in the city's leading social circles. They had married and departed with much pleasant ribaldry and throwing of rice, for South Carolina.

That South Carolina idea had originally been Carroll's. Long years before, he and Stanford Forrest had agreed that when they should

marry they would prefer the quiet country to the turbid city for their honeymoon, and when they discussed plans for Stanford's wedding trip, it was David Carroll who remembered Franklin Furness.

Franklin Furness was a novelist who had sought inspiration in a quiet residential suburb of Berkley City some nine years before; an undersized man with scant hair on an enormous head; a nature as warm and friendly as that of a girl; gentle, patient—and known the fiction world over as the creator of simple, lovable romance.

A doctor, in refusing to recommend Franklin Furness for insurance, advised a cottage in the pine region. Friends suggested Summer-ville, South Carolina, and to Summerville Furness had gone. There he had met a landholder who had sold him an estate on the slow, sluggish Santee river, alleging, and truly, that it would make an ideal site for a workshop; a workshop the owner of which desired solitude and natural inspiration.

Furness had builded on the Santee—a staunch, handsome little four-room cabin, equipped with all conveniences, and there he had

gone with his man-servant. But either he went too early in the fall when the fetid heat of the swamps was still on them; or too late when the clear, bracing fall weather had degenerated into the first nasty stinging rains of winter, because when he returned to Berkley City his friend, the physician, ordered him to Denver.

And in Denver Furness had been for the past six or seven years; his home on Highland Circle still unoccupied and the cabin on the Santee River vacant; monuments, both, to his unquenchable optimism toward the day when he should be well again.

Carroll, Forrest and Furness had been friends, and from the owner Stanford Forrest had received enthusiastic and telegraphic permission to use the Santee River cabin—Furness Lodge—as a honeymoon spot. “Go to it,” Furness had wired. “October in that cabin is love season in loveland.”

On the night of October sixth Stanford Forrest and his bride, accompanied by one Robert Carter, servant in the Forrest household for some twenty years, a man who asserted—and made good his assertions—that he could, and would, do anything from cutting timber to wash-

ing dishes for Mr. Stanford and Miss Mary, entrained for the South.

On the seventh they reached Charleston and on October ninth they departed for Karnak in a delirium of happiness as was attested by a letter received that morning from Stanford—a somewhat saccharine letter written on the stationery of the Charleston hotel and containing a postscript in Mary's firm, round hand. Less than half an hour after the letter had come the telegram announcing Mary's death and Stanford's arrest in connection with it.

"Always the way with these hick constables," chafed Carroll, "they arrest the husband of the dead woman as a matter of principle."

The doorbell rang sharply, and Freda, who had been covertly watching Carroll from a post of vantage near the pantry—his packing was long since finished—hastened to answer its summons. She led Sullivan into the dining room, and, at a nod from Carroll, left the two men alone without pausing to clear the dishes from the breakfast table.

Sullivan seated himself opposite Carroll, and although he said nothing, he marvelled at the sudden change which had come over the features

of his chief. Sullivan had always been proud of the fact that he worked for a man whose efficiency as a detective lay more in powers human than transcendent, but he knew by a single glance that something had occurred to disrupt his superior's entire cosmic scheme.

Lines at the corners of eyes and lips had appeared as by magic, and in the eyes there was a new, a troubled look; as though the owner had gazed upon a disembodied spirit. Sullivan said nothing, and finally—without a word of explanation—Carroll shoved the telegram across to him.

Sullivan had known Forrest only casually and Mary vicariously, but for an instant he experienced a faint twinge of horror as he digested the contents of the telegram. He understood Carroll's sudden ageing, the look of unbelief and terror in his eyes. He passed the telegram back and it was Carroll who spoke first.

"I suppose you can see how it affects me, Jim?"

"Yes, Chief. You know I'm sorry. . . ."

"You can leave immediately with me? This morning?"

"Yes."

“There’s a train at eleven o’clock. You have your luggage with you?”

“I brought it all.”

Carroll shook his head helplessly. “I always need you, Jim; but I’ll need you now more than ever. I would not be able to be quite as impersonal in this case as I have been in others. Forrest, you know, was—well he was more than a brother to me.”

Sullivan nodded. “I understand. I hope I’ll be able to help. You know how to reach the place?”

Carroll laughed bitterly. “Slightly. I planned every minute detail of Stanford’s wedding trip. They went to Charleston first where their car had been shipped. They stocked up there and went by automobile to the Furness place—it’s about eighteen miles beyond Karnak, the county seat of Karnak County. But we’ll go direct on the Florida Limited to Florence, where we’ll change for a local. I figure we’ll get there about noon of tomorrow the eleventh. As to what we’ll find—”

“We’ll find enough to clear Mr. Forrest,” said Sullivan grimly. “He couldn’t have had any motive—”

"Certainly not. The thing sounds horrible to me. He didn't kill her. Why, he couldn't do a thing like that even if he wanted to. Confound distance; I'll know nothing for twenty-four hours. Not a thing. . . ."

"Tickets?" suggested Sullivan.

"We'd better go. I must stop at the bank."

They went in David Carroll's high-powered roadster, stopped by the Berkley City National while Carroll cashed a sizeable check and then made their way to the depot where they bought tickets and a section for Florence.

Then came the interminable wait for the train, southbound from New York. During that wait Carroll told Sullivan the history of Stanford Forrest and the girl. He tried to be dispassionate, impressing upon the younger man the necessity for clear-headed thinking of which he—Carroll—did not seem capable in the face of the personal crisis.

And finally the crier announced the Limited; Carroll and Sullivan took their suitcases, presented their tickets at the gate and eventually ensconced themselves on the velvet cushions of one of the Pullmans.

Carroll leaned back in the corner of his seat,

staring unseeingly from the window as the train pulled slowly out of the shed and headed southward. An early frost had nipped at the city that night, and the air was clear and cold. . . .

"Well," said Sullivan, valiantly trying to bring what cheer he could to his companion, "we're off at any rate."

"Yes," answered Carroll dully, "we're off—but—to what?"

CHAPTER II

THE inordinately sleepy little town of Karnak had been jarred from its lethargy by the murder at Furness Lodge.

Such business as there was remained at a standstill for the two days following the startling disclosures. The second evening previous Stanford Forrest had driven into Karnak in his car, Robert Carter, sober faced and steady, at the wheel. In the tonneau sat a stricken man with the body of a woman in his arms.

That woman was his bride of three days. She had been murdered, so the story ran, with an ice pick. And they had arrived only that morning from Charleston en route to their honeymoon home on the Santee.

It had been dark on the night of the ninth when Forrest drove into Karnak, and had asked direction to the home of the Sheriff John Potter. To the steady-eyed sheriff, the bridegroom's story had been told. Tom Hanford, county coroner, had been summoned and had taken the

body in charge. Then the sheriff personally escorted Stanford Forrest to the little brick building at the rear of the Court House, cleaned and inspected the double-barrelled shotgun of Orrin Kinney, the jailer; following which the sheriff and jailer, both armed, had seated themselves in the jailer's office for a long vigil.

John Potter had always lived in Karnak, just as had his father before him, and his grandfather before that. He knew the temper of his constituents; the high-strung, inflammable mob spirit of South Carolina's rural districts which acts first and considers later. And being a sincere and trustworthy man he took no chances. Sheriff John Potter was there to see that the lynch law spirit was nipped before it had a chance to bud.

So he and Orrin Kinney had sat through the night of the ninth while Stanford Forrest paced his cell, eyes wide and dry. Two cells away was Robert Carter the chauffeur and man-of-all-work, being held partly because he was considered a material witness and partly because it would have been unsafe for him to have walked the single street of Karnak alone.

The inquest, held at noon of the tenth, was a mere formality. The groom refused to say anything. He sat in the room like a graven image, staring dumbly at the clay which had been his bride. He answered no questions and made no statement. Only once had he spoken and that was when Robert Carter was on the stand and the faithful servant had looked at him beseechingly when closely questioned by the coroner.

"Tell the truth," Forrest had snapped then, and dropped back into his immobile staring at nothing.

The findings of the jury had been a foregone conclusion. Stanford Forrest was accused of the murder of his wife and bound over to the Grand Jury without bond. Then he had gone back to his cell. Robert Carter had been released, but he hung around the jail like a hounded animal. He seemed as affected by the murder as was his master.

Shortly after the inquest had come the reply from David Carroll. Sheriff Potter delivered it personally, and again asked Forrest if he cared to talk.

"No, Sheriff," came the dull answer. "I don't. I'm a stranger in a strange land. I'll

wait until Carroll gets here. He's a friend to me—and the best detective in the country."

"I've heard of him," said Potter. "Even down here."

"You've treated me decently. I hope you'll give him as free a hand as you conscientiously can. He's honest—right straight through."

"I'll give him the run of the place. In fact as soon as I knew you had sent for him I stationed one of my best deputies at the Furness place with orders to allow no trespassing on any pretext. I'm no sleuth myself, but I do know the value of leaving the locale undisturbed."

"Thanks, Sheriff. That's white of you. Though Lord knows why—"

"Because, my boy, I play hunches pretty strongly. And I don't think you're any more guilty than I am."

The eleventh of October was as clear and bright and pleasant as only a perfect October day in South Carolina can be. Orrin Kinney was on duty—armed—before the jail. In front of that little structure the red brick Court House reared its squat, unimaginative form. The yard in which both buildings were located was studded with groups of visitors from the

country districts listening to the greatly elaborated story as retold by gossipers. Feeling against the accused ran high, there was a unanimity of belief in his guilt. Only the knowledge of the stern, ruthless sheriff who had passed the word that he intended to see that Forrest came to no bodily harm, save through due process of law, stayed the mob virus.

All up and down the single dirty main street on the two sides of which are the frame structures which comprise the business district of the little town, men and women discussed the case. Not since a general fracas on election day some four years previous had the town been so stripped of its aplomb. Usually, Karnakians found conjecture too great a mental tax.

But today it was different. In the Merchant's & Farmer's Bank the lady teller aired her views with a planter from Chickasaw. Across the street, on the veranda of the Karnak Hotel, the stout landlady held forth on the punishment which should be visited on those brutes of men who killed their wives or who wished to. Simpson's Drug Store, always a focus for gossip, was crowded and the attenuated druggist plied a large trade by insistence that his vis-

itors either indulge in cigars and soft drinks or make way for those who were willing to do so.

But it was at the depot that the largest crowd had gathered, just as it was from the depot—through the station agent—the news of Carroll's advent had come. That—even to the wording of the two telegrams—had long since become public property.

David Carroll, speeding south, had slept little. All night long he had lain motionless in his berth listening to the monotonous pounding of the wheels on the rails. At nine o'clock in the morning the train arrived at Florence, the great railroad junction point for southeastern South Carolina. There Carroll and Jim Sullivan alighted, crossed a half dozen tracks to a cosy little depot and partook sparingly of a breakfast which traveling men declare has no equal between Richmond and Jacksonville.

At nine-thirty their train was made up, a local for Charleston connecting with the Sumter train at Lanes. At eleven o'clock the train thundered across the bridge which spans the Santee River. To David Carroll it seemed that the stops at the tiny, and usually townless stations, were inter-

minable. He controlled himself only by the exercise of the greatest will power.

If only he knew the story of the crime—just some little tiny details to amplify the bare fact of the murder and Stanford's arrest; something upon which he might let his fertile mind speculate. They groaned on closer and closer to Karnak. And finally the train rolled in.

Karnak has a population of less than three hundred, but there were more than five hundred persons grouped near the depot when David Carroll alighted; drawn there by the magic of the underground telegraph of gossip. First sight of Carroll brought a sigh of disappointment. They had expected to see a great detective and instead they saw two boys, one a bit round and pink-faced; the other obviously even younger, though taller, broader and with flashing black eyes and crinkly raven hair. It seemed absurd that either could be the expected man.

It remained to Mart Farnam to put an end to the conjecture over which was which. He crossed to the depot where the two men stood uncertainly beside their suitcases, and Carroll raised his eyes to those of the native.

He saw a man who was typical of the white trash of the swamp region, a man nearly six feet in height, unkempt, ill-clad. Despite his emotional stress Carroll took in every detail of the man and his attire—Farnam was of a species hitherto unknown to him.

Farnam was tall, gangling, awkward. He wore a gray woolen shirt of uncertain age, obviously unwashed for some time as was attested by a streak of dirt on one side and a large, greasy splotch under the left arm. The shirt was open at the throat, disclosing a skinny neck and bony chest. The trousers had probably never seen a crease since leaving the salesman. The socks had once been white, and the shoes seemed almost beyond hope; huge brogans, run down at the heels, one of them spotted red in two or three places under a thin dust coating.

Carroll, professionally trained, catalogued every detail in the brief second of introduction. It was Mart Farnam who spoke first, and he addressed Jim Sullivan: "You ain't Mr. David Carroll—are you?"

Sullivan shook his head. "No. I *ain't*."

"Then *you* be?" He turned to Carroll.

"Yes, I'm David Carroll. What can I do for you?"

"Nawthin'—Nawthin'. . . . You do look pow'ful young."

"I am."

"An' we was kinder expectin'. . . . Anyways, I seen you fellers standin' here an' it kinder struck me maybe you was lookin' f'r th' jail or the Co't House or maybe th' hotel."

"Is Mr. Forrest in the jail?"

"He sho' is. I'll take you over there if you like."

"Thanks . . ." The two men picked up their suitcases and started toward the court house in the wake of the self-important Mart Farnam who, for once in his life, experienced the thrill of the unanimous envy of his fellow citizens. He paused long enough to introduce himself: "My name's Martin Farnam—called 'Mart' for short. What might yours be?"

"Sullivan," answered Jim. "James Blaine Sullivan. I'm Carroll's general factotum."

"Please 't' meet y'." Farnam stuck out one bony hand while he wiggled the left arm from under the pit of which peeped the big grease spot. "I 'low it's a real pleasure to be talkin'

to a couple of real detectives—though I'm confession' that you-all ain't what I reckoned on seein'."

They resumed their way toward the Court House which rose stark between Simpson's Drug Store and Reed's Merchandise Emporium. They found Farnam a wellspring of chatter. Carroll spoke only once, and then, as he waved a comprehensive hand toward the crowd—"What are all those people doing standing round the street?"

"Talkin', I reckon."

"About this—affair?"

"Reckon so."

"They all think Mr. Forrest is guilty?"

"They sure do. He was bound over by Tom Hanford—he's our coroner—yestiddy, an' he didn't even say he didn't do it. D'ye know that fool man wouldn't say *nothin'*."

"I imagine not."

"Thet's mostly what got the people to talkin' ag'in him. Now me—I ain't sayin' he done it. There's most likely more to a case like this than a feller would imagine. Now I was sayin' only today to Sheriff Potter—him an' me is good friends, you know; I was sayin' to th' sheriff as

if he wasn't guilty he wouldn't say 'nothin' where if he was he'd say he wasn't. Ain't that a fact?"

Carroll smiled, despite his mental travail. The lanky swamp angel was a type new to him, and unusually amusing with his quaint mannerisms and propensity for talk. Just where his attractiveness was, Carroll could not see. It may have been that his face would normally be pleasant of expression, but disfigured—however slightly—as it was by a vertical bruise over the left temple; his too long curly hair decidedly unkempt; his cheeks much the worse off for having experienced a too extended vacation from the caresses of a razor—there was little physically about the man to explain Carroll's liking for him.

And so Mart Farnam chattered volubly on until they reached the veranda, watched by many curious eyes. A heavily built, steely-eyed man of medium height, rose to greet them.

"I'm Sheriff Potter," he said heartily.

"David Carroll. My assistant, Mr. Sullivan."

"Delighted to meet you." Potter gave evidence of his delight in two bone-crushing grips.

"I see," and his eyes twinkled, "that you've run shy of our county oracle."

"Farnam?"

"Yes. Can't keep Mart out of the limelight. I suppose he's told you everything there is to tell and learned your life history besides?"

"Very nearly."

Potter laughed heartily. "Worthless cuss, Mart. But he's happy—and jolly good company when you're in the mood." The smile left his lips. "Pardon me for joking, Mr. Carroll. I understand—and nearly forgot—that your interest in this case is personal as well as professional. I want to tell you right here that you've got the run of the place, and you can conscript any help you need from this office. You're a detective: I'm not. And from what I've heard of you, and what I've learned by wire since I knew you were coming on the case, I believe I can trust you to play squarely with me."

Carroll's eyes met his levelly. "Thanks, Sheriff. I think you can trust me."

"I'll chance it. I don't often go wrong on such things. And now—"

"I'd like mighty well to see Forrest—alone."

"Good." Potter led the way to the rear of the Court House. In response to his summons Orrin Kinney, the jailer, a well built man who had seen some thirty-five summers, acknowledged a brief introduction to Carroll and his understanding of orders that Carroll was to see the prisoner whenever he so desired. The same, so said the sheriff, went for Jim Sullivan.

The meeting between Carroll and Stanford Forrest was touching by its very repression of outward emotion. Through the bars the two men looked long into each other's eyes. Their hands went out and clasped.

"I'm sorry, old man," said Carroll softly.

Forrest's voice was choked: "I've been through it."

Carroll tried to ease the emotional tension.

"Of course your arrest was a formality—"

"No."

"Surely—"

"Circumstantial evidence of the worst sort," answered Forrest dully. "David, they've got me dead to rights!"

CHAPTER III

CARROLL stared at his friend on the other side of the barred door. "Of course you are innocent."

"Of course. I guess I'd better begin at the beginning. . . . I'm in a pretty tight hole, David."

Carroll turned away. "I'll get the Sheriff to let me in your cell. And by the way: Jim Sullivan is down here. I'd like him to hear it, too, if you don't mind."

For the barest fraction of a second Stanford Forrest hesitated. Then he nodded: "There's an element I won't enjoy discussing before a comparative stranger, David—but since it's Sullivan. . . . I guess he'd better get the story first hand."

Five minutes later the three men faced one another on chairs furnished by the obliging sheriff who had pledged his word that he would personally see to it that they were not disturbed. Forrest lighted a cigar and Carroll, calmer now

in the actual atmosphere of the trouble, studied him closely.

The first sight of his friend had been a severe shock. That he would see a change in the usually carefree young man was a foregone conclusion, but that Stanford should have been metamorphosed seemed a miracle. The laughing light of his fine brown eyes had been usurped by a solemn brooding, a lurking look of horror which seemed to peer out from some disturbed brain-cell. His square shoulders sagged, he was beset with an excessive nervousness; feet tapping on the concrete floor, fingers beating an erratic tattoo on the cane seat of his chair. He puffed on a rank cheroot viciously, sending great clouds of acrid smoke into the narrow confines of the cell. And then, abruptly, he began.

"I want to get it all off my chest, David; so if you don't mind—I'll start right at the beginning. If there is anything that isn't clear to you while I'm speaking . . . just fire your questions."

"That's good, Stan. Go ahead."

"We arrived in Charleston on the evening of the seventh and went immediately to the

Charleston Hotel. I'll not say anything about how happy we were. . . . God! and that only four days ago. It seems like four years, David. On the eighth I sent Carter in the car, which we had shipped by freight to Charleston some time ago, to the Furness place out on the river. It is a drive of about fifty miles and rotten bad roads for a great part of the distance. He got back at nightfall having straightened up a good bit, but he said that the place showed signs of having been recently occupied."

Carroll sat up straight in his chair. "Recently occupied?" he echoed. "What did he mean by that?"

"He was probably mistaken. But he insisted that there was no dust to be seen. Of course, whatever belongings or furnishings were there would not have surprised him as he had never been to the place before and he didn't know what Frank Furness might have left. But he did insist that the place had been very recently cleaned and dusted. His statement struck me as peculiar—"

"Rather."

"But, at the time, I didn't pay any attention

to it. He had taken a complete line of supplies up there; two hundred pounds of ice, groceries, some meats, canned goods . . . about everything we had been able to think of and which we could get into the car for a single trip. The following morning—the ninth—with Carter driving and Mary and myself in the back seat, we started out for the real commencement of the honeymoon, the car loaded with such supplies as we had forgotten the previous day. In it, too, were our suitcases and incidentals such as fishing tackle and what-nots. Our trunk had gone to Karnak direct and Carter had taken it out the previous day.

“We reached Karnak about noon. I stopped at the post office and they handed me a few letters. The clerk seemed inclined to gossip, but I didn’t say anything except that I was going to the Furness cabin—which was all Carter had told the natives on the previous day. We started out for the river and I opened one of the letters. It was postmarked Columbia, South Carolina, the eighth and—” his voice dropped to a mere whisper, “it was from Bennet Hemingway!”

"Eh? Bennet Hemingway! He's the man—"

Forrest nodded. "The ne'er-do-well who caused the quarrel between Mary and myself when our engagement was broken. You will remember that he financed an elaborate act in which Mary starred her last year on the vaudeville stage." He turned to Sullivan. "David will explain all this to you. I'd rather that he did it."

"The letter?" queried Carroll sharply. "You are sure it was dated at Columbia on the eighth?"

By way of answer Stanford Forrest rose and stepped to the door of his cell. Sheriff Potter came in answer to his call. "Will you show that letter to Mr. Carroll, Sheriff?"

Carroll inspected the postmark. There was no doubt of it—the thing was stamped with unusual clarity: "Columbia, S. C. October 8,—5 P. M." It was written on the stationery of the Mott Hotel. He glanced inquiringly at his friend, and Forrest nodded. "Read it,—of course."

The letter was brief:

October 8.

Mr. Stanford Forrest,
General Delivery,
Karnak, South Carolina.

Sir:—

I trust that you will be happy with your bride but I doubt it. I was willing to marry her in spite of the nature of her relations with me in the past. But since you have her, I take pleasure in letting you know that she is decidedly unlike Cæsar's wife.

BENNET HEMINGWAY.

Carroll inhaled sharply. Into his mind's eye leaped a picture of Bennet Hemingway, tall, slender, a man with brooding eyes and wide, sensuous lips; cruel, unscrupulous, detested even in his own crooked circle of acquaintances in the narrow business world in which he moved. He handed the letter back to the Sheriff, and Potter courteously withdrew. Carroll flung a question, born of suspicion, at his friend. "What was Hemingway doing in this part of the country on the eighth?"

Forrest shook his head. "The last I heard of him he was travelling for a machinery company of some sort. Had an interest in it, I believe."

"You didn't know he was in South Carolina?"

"I didn't much care. Until that."

"And the letter, Stanford; of course you didn't believe it."

The man's pallid face flushed. "Of course not. But some perverse instinct prompted me to put it in my pocket. I always had a failing for keeping letters which should be destroyed."

"Did you show it to—to—Mary?"

"No." His slender fingers clasped and unclasped nervously. Tears sprang into his eyes and he choked. . . . "I wouldn't have shown it to her for the world. I knew that his insinuations were dirty lies calculated to raise a spectre of misery between Mary and me. The least I could do was to keep the thing from her. I felt it would be an insult to show her the letter."

"I see . . . I see. . . ." Carroll glanced toward Sullivan to catch the keen eyes of his young assistant fastened speculatively on Forrest's face. Sullivan was not good at concealing his beliefs and Carroll saw that the young man was sceptical. Knowledge of this came as a shock to the detective. He had gone into the

case predetermined as to Forrest's innocence. Developments had borne this out, except—

Suppose Stanford Forrest had believed Hemingway's letter?

Silence had fallen in the cell. The quaint noises of the town drifted in to them: some negroes chanting a plantation melody, a mechanic roundly cursing a recalcitrant flivver, a north-bound flyer whistling for a crossing three or four miles away.

"As I was saying," picked up Forrest suddenly, "I didn't show her the letter. Nor did I tear it up. It didn't make me anything save killing mad. I would have killed Bennet Hemingway cheerfully. . . . And I wondered about his being in Columbia on the eighth.

"This red mood passed off as we bumped over the corduroy road which leads from Karnak to Furness Lodge. It is very pretty country at this season of the year, David; very pretty. Although maybe, then, anything would have looked beautiful. At least, my friend, I have tasted happiness.

"We reached Furness Lodge about 1:30 and immediately sent Carter back to Karnak in the car for a shipment of canned goods which were

to have come up from Charleston on the morning train. We were alone. . . .

“We walked around the place, down to the river . . . and at 4:30 when we got back to the cabin, Mary insisted that I take my fishing tackle and go down to the river landing about a mile from the house while she fixed our first dinner alone. She—she—you know—” he broke off shortly and then continued with an effort: “A bride, David. . . . Anyway, I went and left her bustling about the place, fussing with the fire in the battered old range and insisting that she would fix a supper which would make my mouth water. Said she was going to prove that her theatrical career had not robbed her of domestic ability. It was all very foolish, and very kiddish—and very, very sweet.

“I kissed her good-bye and went down to the landing with my fishing tackle. I didn’t have any luck fishing and didn’t much care. I was thinking about how happy I was then and was always going to be. At about six o’clock she came down to the river to get the key to our trunk. She wanted to dress up in one of her new gowns and she made me promise to wait a half hour before returning.

"She stopped on a little knoll on the way back to the cabin and waved her hand to me. And that, David, was the last time I ever saw her. When I reached the house a half hour or so later . . . just in the gray dusk of evening . . . she—she was dead."

"Tell me about it, Stan. About your arrival at the house."

"I came whistling up the path toward the house. There was a single light—lamp, of course—burning in the dog-trot, as I believe they call it—the hallway which bisects the cabin from the middle of the front porch to the rear veranda.

"I called to her lightly as I came near the house. I asked her if she was ready for me to come in. I stood before the house for some time waiting for her, and when she didn't appear I walked on inside . . . singing happily.

"I looked in the dining room. The table was all set. She wasn't in there. Nor was she in the bedroom. I walked back to the rear veranda . . . and the light was dim and gray there. At first I couldn't see. . . . And then—then—I saw her. Huddled on the floor near the ice-box. There was blood all about. . . .

She—" He bent over suddenly and buried his face in his hands, great, dry sobs racking his body.

"What had been used—what sort of instrument?"

"The horror of it. . . . She had been killed with an ice-pick. I picked it up. . . ."

"Sudden heat," came quietly from Sullivan. Carroll looked his way and nodded.

"Yes. It obviously wasn't premeditated."

"She was lying near the ice-box," continued Forrest brokenly. "She had probably been fixing supper when the murderer came there. I—well I guess I went crazy. I just sat there with her, her head in my lap. I thought that she might come back to life . . . but she didn't. No—she was dead. . . ."

"Carter came back from Karnak and found me there. He can tell you more about what happened after that than I can. I never thought of being suspected in connection with the crime. I brought the body in. . . . I refused to say a word at the inquest yesterday. They put me here. Carter says they wanted to lynch me. I wish to God they had. Except that I would never then have the satis-

faction of putting my hands on the man who did it."

Fifteen minutes later Carroll and Sullivan left the cell. They made their way through the Court House to the veranda and stepped to one side, gazing curiously upon the groups of men and women who stared at the famous detectives from the north.

"What's your idea, Jim?" asked Carroll quietly.

Sullivan shook his head. "I hate to have ideas this early in the game, Chief."

"I saw you looking at Stan as though you were doubtful of his veracity."

Sullivan turned earnestly toward his superior. "I don't want to hurt you, David, but I must speak frankly. You yourself admitted when you started down here that you were coming for the purpose of freeing Mr. Forrest. Am I to consider that we are here for that purpose or to find who really is guilty."

"You mean—?"

"Suppose we trace guilt inevitably to your friend?"

"That's absurd. . . ."

"Nothing is absurd in a case like this, Chief.

Don't think I have leaped at any conclusions. But if I can go at this case open-mindedly I'll feel infinitely better about it. You've lost your sense of perspective, if I may be frank, because of your friendship for Mr. Forrest. I believe I can see some things—in this case—with greater clarity than you. Am I at liberty to do so?"

"Yes."

"Even though they point to Mr. Forrest?"

Carroll answered softly. "Yes, even though they incriminate my friend. But why in God's name should you reach the same asinine conclusion at which this rube sheriff jumped?"

"There is every reason," came the quiet answer. "I don't agree with Mr. Forrest's logic about the letter. I don't believe he would have failed to show it to his wife. And it struck me while he was talking that perhaps he got his mail and put it in his pocket and forgot all about it—until, as he says, he went to the river. Let us presume that he fished for that two hours. Then she came down there to get the key. That may have reminded him of the letters—searching in his pockets, you know.

"This is only a theory: but as a theory it is worth while. Let us presume that he read the

letter then for the first time . . . that he went to the cabin in a white heat of suspicion; that she—well, we'll say, *would* deny the accusation.

“If we accept these premises, Chief,” he finished soberly, “it would be wrong to eliminate Mr. Forrest as a suspect!”

CHAPTER IV

CARROLL'S eyes widened. He was too honest to deny the logic of his companion's utterance. He knew that had he gone into the case of a stranger to the *dramatis personae* he, too, would have believed Forrest guilty until he found evidence to the contrary. Too well he knew that circumstantial evidence is often right—more often than some would have us believe. And circumstantial evidence designated Forrest inexorably.

But Carroll was seeing this case as he had seen no other case in his career. He called himself a psychological detective. He had solved crime after crime by his keen judgment of character, by his ability to separate the wheat of verity from the chaff of falsification; the vitality of the relevant from the unnecessary and cluttering irrelevant.

His method had surprised police chiefs with their rote and brainy detectives with their elaborate observations and carefully worked-out deductive theories. Carroll worked with these

weapons of his trade. He knew them well. Criminal records were his chiefest allies. He knew to the dot the value of the elaborate system of criminal tabulation which has been builded by years of painstaking and arduous labor in every city of the United States. He knew, too, the value of physical clues. But he also recognized the fact that in actual practice a too great weight cannot be laid on clues; he had seen men—good men—misled by a button, a bit of clothing, a strand of hair; misled and sent chasing on a false scent while the criminal made a getaway.

As a student of applied criminology, David Carroll had evolved a system of his own; a system so simple, so devoid of elaborateness, so dependent upon the personal element, that it had at first been ridiculed. There had followed the Harrington and Fanshaw cases. David Carroll became a national figure in police circles.

His method had been to inject himself into the crime; to arrive by means of his ingratiating personality, by an absence of gruffness and third degree methods, by quiet sympathy,—at a complete understanding of the psychic state

of a suspect at the time of the commission of the crime. Bare facts he catalogued and let them go at that. It was the mental state he sought rather than the physical condition.

But here he saw his system set almost at naught insofar as Stanford Forrest was concerned. He loved Forrest too dearly to believe in his guilt. He approached the case with a warped perspective and he knew it. But David Carroll was honest, and he understood his own human frailties as well as he understood those of others. He told Sullivan as much.

"What you have said is true, Jim. You've got to be my check-rein. What I want is the truth. If the truth puts the noose around Stanford's neck I shall try to take it off. But," and his jaw squared grimly; "if there's a chance on earth that he isn't guilty, if there are mitigating circumstances,—I'm going to find it. I'm frankly in the lists to get Stanford off. If—if he—killed her—then he deserves what any man who would do that deserves. Only Jim—he didn't do it. I know he didn't do it. He *couldn't*. Not any more than I could. . . ."

Jim Sullivan forced a smile. "Hope not, Chief. I'm as foolish in jumping to one extreme

as you are in leaping at the other. But if we want to get things in their true light we've got to go at this like we'd go at anything else. You're showing me that you're human, David—that you're as fallible as the rest of us—”

“I had thought I was not.”

“So had I. But that's neither here nor there. The thing to do is to comb this district solid. There isn't a fact or a circumstance too insignificant for us to get onto. And,” significantly, “I don't imagine we'll have a whole lot of trouble making these natives talk.”

“No.” Carroll lighted a cigarette. Sullivan's speech had served to somewhat quiet his nerves. He swung suddenly on his assistant. “Haven't you overlooked one thing, Jim?”

“Several probably. Which one in particular?”

“Bennet Hemingway?”

“The man who wrote that rotten letter?”

“Yes?”

“He's a cur—right. What about him?”

“You noticed that that letter was postmarked Columbia on the eighth?”

“Sure. I say . . . you don't think—?”

“I think this,” returned Carroll grimly, “and

I think you will agree with the theory; the man who would write that sort of a letter would stop at nothing on the calendar, would he?"

"Scarcely."

"Just consider: here we know that he was in Columbia on the eighth. We know that he was in love with Mary in his own dirty, rotten way. That much I know from my friendship with her. Now just let us admit that all this is wild theory—also let us be fair and admit that it is no more wild than your idea of Stanford Forrest's guilt; suppose Hemingway's passion for her was of such strength that it reached the killing heat at thought of her marriage to another man. I won't call such a thing love . . . but even our own dear gunmen have killed for women. It's the age-old motive for murder. Do you agree—or am I getting senile in my desire for my friend's vindication?"

"You're talking like yourself," applauded Sullivan. It was typical of Carroll's character that his assistant was also his critic. "Go to it."

"Remember I am not now accusing Hemingway of the crime. But he had a motive: girl he craved married to another man. We know,

as item number two on the list, that he was in Columbia on the eighth and therefore could have been in Karnak on the ninth. Item number three, we know that if such a man planned cold-blooded murder he could have done nothing more calculated to divert suspicion from himself and onto the shoulders of Stanford Forrest than by having found in Forrest's possession just such a letter as he wrote. Am I still logical?"

Sullivan was frowning. "You are. Appallingly so. Because when either of two men have motive and chance for the commission of a crime it is foolish to suspect either. One is obviously innocent."

"Precisely. One thing we must find out is where Mr. Bennet Hemingway was on the ninth. I'd have to know more than I do now to assure myself that he was connected with the crime in any way. But, Jim, I've gone into this as I have just to show you that you have been unjust in leaping too readily to the conclusion that Stanford Forrest is guilty."

Sullivan flushed slightly. "*Touche!*"

Carroll clapped him on the shoulder; "And now let's go hunt the hotel. I think we both

see things more clearly. All I can say now is—Keep your eyes and ears open. Since I am convinced that Stanford did not do it—we're liable to run across several interesting developments."

"Yes," answered Sullivan, "if he didn't!"

Karnak bustled with the activity of late afternoon. The single dusty street was crowded with sputtering flivvers, dust-covered touring cars, labouring ox teams and a few horses and buggies: farmers returning from town to their estates; planters leaving for the night at their plantations; clerks bound homeward. Lights flickered in the several general stores, shedding a radiance in the gray dusk of early evening, the huge white house owned by Cæsar Carn, leading light of the Karnak bar, became suddenly illumined as his ancient helper, Doll Wofford by name, touched flame to the ceiling burners. The station agent and his telegraph operator switched off their keys leaving the main line wire clear and trudged toward the hotel.

The sun sank slowly below the serried skyline of majestic pines to westward, a great flaming ball spreading a magnificent glow over the gray-green landscape.

To the east, already settling under the darkening pall of night, lay Hell Hole swamp, a great waste of bog and water, of decaying stumps and sturdy water oaks bedecked with cloudlike bunches of gray moss. Even in October one could sense the miasma which hung over the swamp. It was a place to bring shudders . . . to the west it was country of a more undulating nature, boasting a bit of severe beauty.

Carroll and Sullivan carrying their grips despite the earnest attempts to relieve them made by an attenuated negro who volubly pointed out to them the various structures calculated to keep the spark of civic pride burning in the Karnakian breast—made their way the length of the dusty street, past Simpson's drug store, the post office, Cæsar Carn's handsome home, and several stores and ramshackle garages, to the rather attractive two-story frame dwelling which flung forth the sign—

GRAND HOTEL.

The portly landlady was swinging blithely on the veranda swapping gossip with one Camilla Robinson, stenographer extraordinary in the

office of the clerk of the Court. As the two strangers swung in at the gate they abruptly ceased their chatter and rose expectantly. Sullivan heard a distinct sibilance: "It's them!" from Camilla.

The landlady struck a bargain quickly: two dollars for a double room with dinner and breakfast for two. Trust her to take advantage of affluence. At their request for private bath she assured them that there was an excellent lock on the door and the bath therefore thoroughly private. Later Jim Sullivan was to learn that one must needs be a strategist to gain possession of the bathroom.

They shaved and changed linen, completing their toilet just as a huge gong sounded from downstairs. They descended slowly to find a motley crew surging from the front room to the dining room near the back veranda; two lawyers, seven railroad men, the lady teller at the Karnak bank, Camilla Robinson, Ellery Simpson, proprietor of the drug store; Peter Royce, clerk of the Court and champion long-distance gossip of the community, in town for the express purpose of seeing to it that the newcomers did not find themselves in want of information.

The two strangers stood uncertainly in the doorway until it became apparent that the service was strictly a case of first come, first served. They found chairs placed for themselves at one of the long tables and settled down to a not untasty meal of fried chicken, corn bread, rice and gravy, little chunks of meat which the colored servitor flatteringly named "steaks." The preliminaries of service attended to, the one hopeless bit of ice in the big tea goblet nursed to the point of maximum effort, and the two detectives settled themselves to the task of making friends with their neighbours.

It was very easy. Karnak was agog with speculation as to what manner of men these famous detectives might be. Therefore the subject turned naturally to the Forrest case, with Peter Royce leading the conversation of the townsmen.

"Of course," he said, once the conversation had broken the reserve ice, "there ain't no one knows except himself, but I'm pretty well satisfied this here Mr. Forrest did it."

Carroll flushed but said nothing. It was Sullivan who answered. "What makes you think that?"

"Didn't they find him with the body? Didn't he have that there letter about him saying that his wife wasn't all she might have been?"

Chatter had died down. The room was listening to Peter Royce, and the venerable Peter, basking in the calcium, determined to relinquish no whit of his temporary prominence.

"Perhaps the letter wasn't true," suggested Sullivan, eager to draw an expression of the community's opinion.

"P'r'aps not. I ain't saying it was true. But I am saying that if the husband believed it was true that's all was necessary. Ain't that a fact, sir; ain't it a fact?"

"No—o. Not exactly."

"Hmph! You northern detectives never will admit a thing. Not that I'm blaming you; that's your business. But maybe you can answer this: If Mr. Forrest didn't do it—*who did?*"

"I'm sure I don't know. I'm trying to find out."

"I'm thinking there ain't any use of looking any further. It ain't like they had been living here. They come through town that afternoon, stopped at the postoffice and at Fentress' gen-

eral store and they went right on. There ain't no one hereabouts with any feelin' about them one way or the other. So unless you think that their shoffer done it, you got to believe it was the husband. I'm asking you again—ain't that a fact?"

Sullivan studied the group about the table. It was obvious that the eloquent, self-opinionated old gentleman was voicing the sentiment of the native gathering. The simple minds were eager to seize upon the easiest solution. Why puzzle over possibilities with a perfectly good suspect at hand. And then David Carroll, who had been silently eating with his eyes bent on his plate—lifted his head and fired a question at the gathering.

"Any of you gentlemen or ladies ever hear of a man by the name of Bennet Hemingway?"

"Bennet Hemingway—" started Royce when Ellery Simpson the druggist, jealous of the spotlight which had been temporarily accorded Royce, broke in.

"Medium height man, swell dresser, slick hair, walks with a leetle sort of a limp, travelling salesman for a cotton gin machinery house?"

Carroll's eyes lighted. "Yes. You have seen him recently?"

"He was here the other day. Stayed about eighteen hours I reckon. Right in the very room you got now."

"Do you recall," asked Carroll quietly, "exactly what day he was here?"

"Let me see—"

"It was the sixth," broke in Royce quickly and triumphantly. "I remember because he was in my place looking up the deed to the Furness place—"

Carroll's fork clattered to his plate. "Looking up a deed to the Furness place?"

"Just that. Which struck me as mighty peculiar because—"

"You are sure he left town the next morning?"

"I am," interjected Simpson eagerly. "I seen him go. North on 52. Said he was goin' to make Florence on the seventh and Columbia on the eighth."

"What I was saying," interrupted Peter Royce solemnly, "was that when he was asking me about the title to the Furness place—that's the name of the place where Mr. Forrest

killed his wife, you know—I was asking him wasn't it peculiar that the feller that bought the place from Furness never had had his deed recorded."

Carroll's eyes flashed to Sullivan's. Both men were leaning forward eagerly. They felt that they were on the brink of an important revelation.

"What man bought the place from Furness?" snapped Carroll.

"Man named Heston—Conrad Heston."

"When did he buy it?" Something was wrong. Carroll knew it. His mask of disinterestedness had dropped from him in a second.

"About two months ago—maybe three, I reckon. It's been about three months, ain't it, Miss Robinson, since he went there to live?"

The girl opened her lips to answer, but Carroll cut her short. His figure was tensed, his words close-clipped—"Do you mean to tell me that for two months there has been a man living at Furness Lodge? A man who claims to have bought it from the owner?"

"Sure," answered Royce in surprise. "I thought Mr. Forrest must have told you that?" Then inquisitively: "Didn't he?"

The detective controlled his facial muscles with a great effort. "I don't believe he mentioned it," he said casually, resuming his eating as though the tidings had not affected him. But within him there was a seethe of speculation.

Who was this Conrad Heston? What was he doing in the Furness place? For one thing David Carroll knew:

He knew that Franklin Furness had sold Furness Lodge to no one. He knew, at least, that this Conrad Heston was not what he represented himself to be. And, glancing at his assistant, he saw an answering blaze in Sullivan's wide-open eyes.

CHAPTER V

DINNER continued, a miasma of petty gossip hovering above the table, but the two detectives had little more to say. To direct questions they returned monosyllabic answers; they sought no information. One thought was uppermost in the mind of each: to talk it over with the other.

Eventually they finished the flabby slice of pie which topped off the meal and immediately they rose with as little ostentation as possible, made their way through the hall and into the road. Carroll touched Sullivan's arm. "Let's walk up the road a bit," he suggested, pointing westward. "I want to clear the cobwebs from my brain."

Sullivan fell into step by his side. Gray dusk had merged into clear night with star-studded heavens. The air was cool, bracing and fragrant with the clear, sweet odour of pine.

"What do you think of it, Jim?"

Sullivan shook his head. "Regarding it as

a case, it grows more interesting. Do you believe—”

“That Furness sold the place?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a hundred to one shot that he did not. In the first place he wired permission to Stan to use the Lodge for his honeymoon. In the second place you will notice that that loquacious clerk said that this Heston chap had never recorded his deed.”

“But,” interjected Sullivan, “isn’t it possible that there was some deal afoot when Bennet Hemingway was here? Royce says he was looking up the records regarding the Furness place.”

“It looks sinister. He may have known something about a sale to Heston, or it might be that he was endeavoring to get a description of the property without asking questions direct. At any rate Mr. Bennet Hemingway will bear investigation. It is more than possible that he knows Conrad Heston. As for him—”

“—There’s something fishy about him, Chief. Especially if we establish the fact that he does not own the place. Let’s wire Furness.”

“Of course.”



They swung around and headed back toward Karnak, the lights of which were twinkling brightly in the clear October night. They walked quietly through the town, past the jail and made their way to the rambling frame building which did duty as railroad depot and freight warehouse. In the operator's private office Carroll indited a telegram to Franklin Furness in Denver.

Is Furness Lodge still your property?
Have you sold it or put any sort of encumbrance against it? Are taxes paid and is title clear? Answer immediately. Vitally important.

He signed Stanford Forrest's name to the message, gave instructions for its immediate dispatch, and made his way to the jail. The two men walked through the Court House, and stepped into the dark little alleyway separating that structure from the grim little jail.

As they appeared from the door of the court house there was a loud, smacking sound; then a startled cry . . . and Orrin Kinney, the jailer, stepped from the shadows, his manner awkward and embarrassed. Preoccupied as he was,

Carroll smiled. For, by peering intently into the darkness, he discerned the figure of Miss Camilla Robinson, the pretty stenographer. Sullivan chuckled openly and poked Kinney in the ribs. "So that's how the land lies, is it?"

"Please, Mr. Sullivan," begged Kinney, "keep it quiet, won't you? It's a secret. . . ."

"We don't want folks to know," pleaded Camilla. "My folks wouldn't like for me to be married yet. . . . I'm not quite twenty, and they object to Orrin because he's thirty-five—"

"We'll be silent as the tomb," gravely reassured Carroll. "Meanwhile we tender our congratulations. . . ."

"And if there's anything we can do," finished Sullivan, "you can call on us."

Awkward and blushing, the young lovers showered their thanks on the two detectives, and then, in response to Carroll's request, Kinney unlocked the grated door and admitted them to the jail. Stanford Forrest was the only prisoner on the upper tier, which was reserved for the whites. There were several negroes below.

There was an oil lamp burning just outside Forrest's cell and a good dinner lay untouched on his heavy wooden bench.

"Here, here," chided Carroll severely, "that will never do, Stan. You must eat."

The prisoner lifted haggard face. "I can't do it, old man. There's something snapped—in here. I can't choke it down—"

"You must. You need your strength: every ounce you can muster. We want to find the man. . . ."

Fire flamed in Forrest's eyes. "Just to get my hands on him once. If he were twice my size I could kill him—so. . . . I wonder if you know what hate is, David?"

"Probably not, Stan; but I do know what common sense is, and I know it will be common sense for you to conserve your strength for our sake. You benefit no one by this ceaseless worry. Brace up, old boy! Brace up and answer a few questions carefully."

"Very well. What is it?"

Briefly, David sketched to his friend the information given at the dinner table at the Grand Hotel. The dulness died in the eyes of the prisoner and was supplanted gradually by a light of keen interest. He broke out eagerly as Carroll finished: "By Jove! that explains something that Carter said—"

“Yes?”

“You know he went to Karnak on the eighth and went out to the place. When he returned to Charleston he told me that Furness Lodge looked as though it had been occupied. He didn’t find any belongings there, but he said that the furniture was not covered with dust as he had expected, and that he had very little sweeping to do. In fact, he said that the place looked as though it had been consistently cleaned by a woman. I laughed at him, of course.”

“Why so?”

“Because it struck me that even if what he said were so it merely was a case of some hunters or fishermen stopping there for a few hours and straightening the place a little. I figured that even something like that would take away the dust of years and make a place look as though it had been recently occupied. But after what you tell me—”

“It is quite evident that this Mr. Conrad Heston, whoever he may be, has squatted there. And if he was there for any reasons which won’t bear scrutiny we have a new element to deal with in connection with this affair.”

“What steps have you taken?”

"Filed a telegram to Furness, signing your name. The answer ought to be here first thing in the morning. Meanwhile, Stan, if you'll promise to ease yourself down and try to catch a little sleep I'll ramble down the street and see if I can pick up any other morsel of interest. I'd like to find out something about this man Heston."

On the road once again, Sullivan glanced curiously at his superior: "You didn't mention that Bennet Hemingway was in this town on the sixth."

"No."

"What's the use? It would only serve to excite him. And get nowhere. If he knew that Hemingway had been there. . . . I'm afraid he'd have gotten little rest tonight, and he needs rest, Jim: needs it more than either of us can realize. If he doesn't sleep I intend to find a doctor and force an anodyne down his throat. Insomnia is bad for a man inclined, as he is at present, to melancholia."

"And your present plans?"

"The Sheriff mentioned that the drug store was a great gossip centre at night. I suggest that we butt in there and learn as much as we

can regarding Heston; what manner of man he is, what he gave out as his occupation—the whole works in fact.”

They found Simpson's store; a small, one story converted cottage with a rickety veranda spanning its front. On the veranda were a dozen chairs, each occupied by a native enjoying the cool bracing night air. Within the store was a haze of rancid smoke from many cheroots and cheap cigars. Ellery Simpson was perched behind the long counter, dispensing soft drinks to those who did not have moral courage to loaf without purchasing something. The gathering hitched its chairs expectantly as Carroll and Sullivan entered.

Carroll made his way casually to the counter, selected a couple of ten cent cigars, the best in stock—and leaned casually against the showcase. Simpson, quick to detect a willingness for talk, opened the conversation.

“Expect to be here long?”

“Can't tell yet,” returned Carroll, easily, himself once again now that he was confronted with a concrete problem. “I'll probably stick, around until the trial.”

Simpson grinned. “Trial, huh? He's waived

a preliminary hearing and trials here don't come as quick as you Northern folks are used to. We only have eight days of criminal court a year here."

"What?"

"Four court terms; two days criminal docket each term."

Carroll whistled. "The arm of the law moves slowly down here, doesn't it? By the way, speaking of trials—what sort of a looking man is this Conrad Heston who has been staying at Furness Lodge?"

Simpson squinted craftily. "Bet Mr. Forrest was s'prised when you told him about Heston."

Carroll laughed heartily. "Oh!" he parried with a semblance of truth, "he knows all about the man; that is, about his being there. Do you know where he is now?"

"He was in town on the eighth, in the morning."

"And since then?"

"Haven't seen him."

"Wonder why he bought that place from Furness? Have you ever heard him mention?"

"No; can't say as I have. He's a close-

mouthed feller. Never has much to say about himself. 'Pears like he said once that he bought the place for his health, but as he come here in August that don't hardly hold water. August and part of September is usually our worst months for heat and malaria."

"Then I imagine he's not a very sickly looking man, eh?"

"Not so's you could notice it, he ain't. One of these here medium fellers; 'bout five-eight, weighing I guess about a hundred and fifty or thereabouts, sort of sandy hair and blue eyes. Right nice looking feller, although I ain't seen very much of him. But neither has any of us, for that matter. He don't come to town only when he needs supplies. Says he likes it out there."

"Go in for fraternal order work or anything like that?"

"Not him. He's sort of standoffish like most Yankees."

"He's from the north, then?"

"He come from there. Don't know whether he lives there, but he sure talks that funny way you fellers have. Sort of short and quick like you was afraid you'd waste an ounce of breath."

"What part of the north did he come from?"

"Newark, New Jersey."

"So—o. How do you know that?"

"Just guessin'," answered Simpson proudly.

"The day he got here he dropped the stub of his Pullman berth check. The station agent found it and it was from Newark to Charleston."

"I see. By the way, how did he get his baggage out there?"

"He didn't bring nothin' but a grip and one teeny trunk. Mart Farnam carried that out for him. That's mostly how Mart lives—doin' odd jobs like that. He's a shiftless sort of a cuss."

"I've met him," said Carroll. "Rather likable chap."

"Mart's a durn good feller 'cept when he's been hitting the booze. He started that like they all do—all them what live in the swamp like Mart does. They say the whiskey-and-quinine treatment is good for the malaria, and then after they've been taking that awhile they sort of ferget the quinine. But Mart's a nice feller and what he don't know about things hereabouts wouldn't even fill one page of a paper."

"He'd probably know something about Heston, then?" suggested Sullivan.

" 'Course he would. 'Specially as he lives jest about four mile beyond there."

"Beyond the Furness place?"

"Yes. The road from here leads through Hell Hole swamp over to westward yonder, and then close to the Santee River right about three hundred yards or so this side of the Furness place, and then it runs into Santee swamp. That's where Mart lives."

"Little town there?"

"Not exactly what you'd call a town. A few houses; most of the folks there is Farnams or Devarneys of one sort or another; they've sort of lived together and intermarried for years. And being as Mart lives so close to the Furness place he'd most likely know a heap about Mr. Heston. Buttin' into other peoples' affairs is all that makes life worth livin' for Mart—although take it from me, mister, and don't put too much stock in what Mart says. He loves to be pow'ful mysterious an' when he don't know the right of a thing he's sort of inclined to pretend that he does."

A half hour later in the solitude of their room

at the Grand Hotel but with due respect for the adage that walls have ears, David Carroll delivered himself of his conclusions.

"We've learned a good deal, Jim; if Furness's wire gets here tomorrow and bears out my idea that Heston is a squatter—and with a reason for squatting. Men don't pull such tricks without jolly good cause. And if Heston was living there and not wanting to be discovered, and he happened to run across Mary. . . . The idea isn't so scatterbrained, is it?"

"Nothing is," agreed Sullivan gravely, "in a case like this."

"Furthermore, Jim, I have a considerable hunch that Mart Farnam will be a good man to cultivate. He's undoubtedly a blow-hard and cheerful, good-natured liar . . . but I fancy we can get a good deal of valuable dope from him."

"You're right there, Chief. We'll cultivate Mister Farnam and tomorrow—"

"We'll drive out to the Furness place after we've talked with Carter—Stan's man—and gotten Furness's answer to our wire."

Sullivan dropped easily into a deep untroubled slumber. For Carroll the task was not so easy. In a half-doze, visions of sweet-faced

Mary Carmody, of gaunt, haggard, heartbroken Stanford Forrest, of gawky Mart Farnam, of the kindly, broad-shouldered sheriff, of Orrin Kinney and his sweetheart . . . of the thin, evil face of Bennet Hemingway—passed before him. They presented a tangle which he could not yet grasp. He felt a mental exhilaration in the knowledge that these threads must be unravelled. He felt certain of Forrest's innocence . . . yet to be sure that the man was innocent and to prove it were entirely different propositions.

At length sleep came; the deep sleep of utter mental exhaustion. He was waked at seven by the clangor of the gong downstairs. He leaped from his bed, wide awake on the instant. An hour later the two men had finished breakfast, and just as they rose the station agent came in and handed Carroll a telegram. Before opening it the detective met the man's eyes levelly. His voice held a nuance of menace:

"Just let me say, my friend, that it is against the regulations of the telegraph company for the contents of messages to leak out. I advise that you do not speak of what this contains."

The operator shook his head hastily. "Trust

me, sir; trust me." And Carroll knew that his menacing manner had borne fruit. On the veranda he ripped open the yellow envelope and read the answer from Franklin Furness:—

Furness Lodge mine. Has not been sold or encumbered. Taxes paid to first of next year. If any trouble wire.

"You see," he said to Sullivan, in quiet triumph, "our friend Heston is a squatter!"

CHAPTER VI

“**M**EANING,” returned Sullivan, “that he automatically becomes a suspect?”

“Yes—and no. It is obvious, however, that he has been representing himself to be the owner of Furness Lodge when he is not, in fact, the owner. He has been living there for a couple of months. Once we find the reason for that, and learn where he was on the afternoon of the murder, we may be closer to a solution than we are now.”

Sullivan stretched himself. “Looks promising, Chief. I suppose you’ll be moseying around that way pretty soon, eh?”

Sullivan frowned slightly. “What do you know of this man Carter?”

“Trustworthy to a degree. Has been with the Forrests about twenty years and has been almost a father to Stan. Liked Mary as much as he did Stan himself. Admitting that the personal element is swaying me largely in this

investigation, I'd just about eliminate Carter at the outset. You, of course—"

"—Eliminate nobody, although I do say that on Mr. Forrest's own showing Carter is just about absolved. Forrest says, you remember, that Carter returned and found him by the body, which lets him out unless we later believe the theory that Carter killed her, left the house and returned after he had seen his master enter it."

"Yes. . . ." Carroll passed his hand across his eyes. "I have never before realized how horrible crime investigation really is. Everyone, no matter how indirectly connected with a case, is a probable criminal. I'm beginning to see things from the other viewpoint now, Jim. I'll be more sympathetic after this."

Sullivan chuckled. "If you have a fault, David, that's been it. You've been too sympathetic. Meanwhile . . . to Carter."

They found Carter, his face lined with worry, at the garage next to the Karnak bank. He told his story simply and with an absence of circumlocution which impressed both men.

"We came through this town about noon, Mr. Carroll. Stopped and bought some supplies and drove on out to the Lodge. Very rough

road and hard on the car. When we got there and checked up it was found necessary to send me back in for more stuff. I had a blowout on the way and had to change rims. Had a little trouble jacking up the car on the sandy roadbed and was delayed quite a little.

“This place has a cheap vulcanizing plant and they took a long time to fix my tube. I bought a new casing and left the old one. Didn’t dare to take the return trip without my spare tire, and when I eventually got back to the Lodge it was somewhere around six-thirty.

“I approached the house from the rear—the place fronts on a small hill which slopes down to the river. It is the rear which faces the road. As soon as I got near the little back porch I saw something was wrong. It was Mr. Stanford, sir, with the body of Mrs. Forrest in his arms. There was a good deal of blood there, sir, and—knowing what it all meant, I’m afraid I got very ill.

“She was quite dead, sir. It was quite evident that she had been stabbed through the neck with an ice-pick—”

“Why do you say ‘quite evident’?”

“Because the pick was lying near her, sir,

and it was—was covered with blood. The wound showed that it had been driven in from the rear, in a general right-and-left direction. I don't know much about anatomy, sir, but there was so much blood I at once thought it must have pierced the jugular vein.

“Poor Mr. Stanford was almost crazy with grief. He frightened me for a while; I thought he had lost his mind. Then he carried the body by himself to the car and put it in the tonneau and he sat there with it on his lap and I drove in—slowly and carefully, sir, sort of feeling that if the car bumped it might hurt Mrs. Forrest; I sort of couldn't make myself believe that she was dead. The suddenness of it, sir—it was terrible.

“We got into town and went straight to the sheriff's house. He was very kind, sir, and took the body in his own house, and then he arrested Mr. Forrest—sort of apologizing for doing it. But he said he had to. And then he asked Mr. Forrest in the house—”

“What,” interrupted Carroll, “did Mr. Forrest say when he was told he was under arrest?”

“He didn't seem to pay any attention to it,

sir. Just nodded and kept looking at his wife—his wife's body, that is."

"He didn't seem surprised?"

"He didn't seem anything, sir, if you can understand what I mean by that. He was just sort of numb and cold . . . sort of like he was going to faint or die or something."

"And after he had been arrested—?"

"The Sheriff said he'd have to take his personal belongings and Mr. Stanford began to hand them over. And then—" Carter stopped suddenly and paled. "You're a friend to Mr. Stanford, but Mr. Sullivan—"

"Better tell everything, Carter; just as it happened."

"You wouldn't—"

"I must know the whole truth."

"The truth is, sir, that Mr. Stanford tried not to give the letter to the sheriff. Said it was personal and of no importance. You know which letter—"

"The one Hemingway had written?"

"Yes." Carter's teeth clicked together: "I'm a God-fearing man, sir, but if I could see Bennet Hemingway I would kill him cheerfully, sir."

"I don't know but what I'd help you, Carter. And after Sheriff Potter read the letter—?"

"He asked Mr. Stanford what he had to say about it, and Mr. Stanford answered that he had nothing to say about anything except that he didn't do it, and he'd like to wire for you. The Sheriff was awfully decent, sir; didn't try to pump Mr. Forrest and personally took the telegram to the depot. I waited there myself until it had been sent, sir, and then I went to the jail with Mr. Forrest until he sent me back to the Sheriff's house to take care of the body."

The two detectives were satisfied with the man's story. It set forth the facts clearly and lucidly. Before they left him Carroll gave queer instructions. "Carter, I want you to take a spark plug out of your car, crack the porcelain so your motor will spit and fuss; and then drive up and down the street between here and the depot two or three times with your muffler cut out. After which I want you to back the car in the garage and pretend that something is radically wrong with it. Understand?"

Carter's impassive face expressed no surprise. "I'll do it, sir. Will you need me later?"

“Not today.” Carroll turned away. “Come along, Jim.”

Sullivan fell into step beside his superior. “What’s the big idea?” he asked.

“Camouflage,” was the prompt answer. “While we were speaking with Carter I noticed that Mart Farnam was in town and with his battered buggy. From what I’ve heard of Mart he’s a wellspring of valuable information. So when Carter runs up and down the main street with a car loudly out of order there will be no surprise when I ask Farnam to drive us out to Furness Lodge.”

“So—o. You want to pump Farnam en route?”

“Exactly. He lives out there and one of that bunch at dinner last night said that Mart took Heston’s trunk out for him. And since he knows Heston, he can give us plenty of information if we pump him adroitly. And what we need now is some accurate dope about Heston. He’ll require a heap of investigating, Jim.”

They crossed casually to the Court House and joined Sheriff Potter on the veranda. Scarcely had they arrived when Stanford Forrest’s big

touring car, with Carter at the wheel, came sputtering and roaring down the street. The engine was missing steadily, the car jumping ahead in jerks and slowing up alarmingly.

Carter was impassive as the Sphinx. He turned slowly at the depot and drove back toward the garage. On his second trip Carroll hailed him, joined him at the car, spoke quietly to him and then returned to the veranda where he joined Sullivan and the Sheriff. "Car's gone bad," he said. "That's a shame because I had counted on getting out to Furness Lodge to-day sure."

"Hard luck," sympathized Potter.

"I wonder if we couldn't find someone driving out that way?"

Potter shook his head. "You can't hire an automobile to make the trip over that road. It's terrific. If you don't mind a buggy—"

"The point is: we want to get there."

"I see Mart Farnam in town. He lives out there and would be glad to drive you back. But," he grinned, "better let me drive the bargain for you. Mart is a powerful good business man."

Carroll laughed. "Go to it, Sheriff." His

face grew suddenly grave. "You're a white sort, Mr. Potter. I don't know why you've helped me as much as you have—but you've been all-fired decent, and we appreciate it."

"Thanks," dryly. "I had two reasons."

"Yes?"

"First, I believe in being decent; and second, I don't think Forrest had anything to do with killing his wife. I had to arrest him. . . . I'd have done it anyway. Because chances are Old Judge Lynch would have run loose here that first night if he hadn't been safe behind the walls."

"If he didn't," said Carroll, "who did?"

"That's our job to find out, my boy. I'm not a detective. But I'm strong on human nature; knowing men has been my business for about forty-six years and I don't very often go wrong. Even admitting that your friend Forrest is a new breed to me. . . . I'm playing even that he didn't do it."

"And yet the evidence—"

"He'll be convicted unless you can prove positively that he didn't. And as I don't think he did it . . . if there's anything I can do to help you, you can count on me."

The eyes of the men met and held. Carroll gripped the other's hand. "I believe you."

Potter smiled. "Thanks. Where did you get that grip? Your hand looks like a woman's and feels like the business end of a vise."

"If you're with us in finding the real man give me a little information; what do you know about this man Heston who has been hanging around here for the last couple of months?"

"The man who bought the Furness place?"

"Yes."

"Nothing. He seldom comes to town and has nothing to say when he does. Some say he's a scientist and others say he's a writer. No one has anything against him, and I've sort of liked what I've seen of him. Why?"

"Because," answered Carroll slowly, "I don't mind telling you since you've agreed to help us, that he has had no more right to live in the Furness Place than you have."

"What?"

"Exactly. He's a squatter. There's something wrong with the whole works. If, as everyone says, he's a city man of breeding, then there's a pretty strong reason for representing himself as the owner of Furness Lodge and liv-

ing there for two months. Further, in order—being a stranger—to have known of Furness. Or about him, anyway. If he knew Furness it is more than possible that he knew either Stanford Forrest or Mary, his wife; both of whom were intimate with Furness. And somewhere in that mass of conjecture there may be a motive for even so heinous a crime as murder.”

The Sheriff puffed meditatively on his cigar. “It’s a right nimble mind you’ve got, my son. You’d have made a good lawyer. Have you wired this chap Furness?”

“Yes.” Carroll extended the telegram received that morning from Furness. “There’s one fact established.”

“Seems to me that I’d wire him again asking if he has ever heard of a chap named Conrad Heston.”

Carroll took a loose-leaf notebook from his pocket and scribbled a telegram to Franklin Furness in Denver. This he handed to Jim Sullivan. “Beat it down to the depot, will you, Jim, and hang around until they get this wire off?” He turned back to the Sheriff. “So much for that suggestion. And now—have you any others?”

"What do you know about this man Carter?"

"Insofar as anyone can be trusted, I trust him."

"That lets us down with Heston, eh? Seemed a nice sort of a chap. Very decent."

"Heston—and one other." Carroll eyed the Sheriff closely.

"One other?"

"Bennet Hemingway, the man who wrote that letter you found on Stanford Forrest was in Karnak on the sixth!"

"So—o? Where was he on the ninth?"

"I'm rather interested in finding out. He's a yellow dog if there ever was one, Sheriff. If I could prove that he was anywhere around here on the ninth I'd end the case right there. As soon as I look the scene over and get some definite dope about Heston I'll get on Hemingway's trail. He'll be pretty easy to follow. He's travelling for a big machinery company and is selling gin machinery through the cotton belt."

"I think I recall your man. Still—he may have an alibi. Heston looks like the best bet."

"He does. There must be something rotten about him. And the fact that he had been living

in that house. . . . They tell me Mart Farnam might know something about him."

"They told you right," chuckled Potter. "Mart Farnam knows more about the business of every other person in Karnak county than he knows about his own. If you have any ability at separating truth from lies you'll find Farnam a valuable man to cultivate. Besides, he lives right out in the swamp, about four miles from Furness Lodge."

"You reckon I could hire Farnam to drive us around a bit—just so as to pump him dry?"

"Good pay for little work is Farnam's motto," laughed Potter. "If that's all you want him to do he's your meat. I wish you joy—he's a darned interesting character."

Carroll nodded. "Then it's up to me to find him and strike a bargain. If he can tell me anything definite about Heston he'll be worth many times his cost."

CHAPTER VII

THERE was little conversation during the first few miles of the bumpy drive to Furness Lodge. They sat in a large and ancient buggy, a single-seater of such ample proportions as to afford room for the trio.

Farnam, gaunt, lanky, self-important, sat on the right, driving with his right hand and using his left gingerly, because, as he explained, two fingers of his left hand had been mashed in a door and he exhibited badly blackened nails to testify to his assertion. "An' busted nails hurt like thunder," he finished. Carroll and Sullivan subscribed heartily to his statement.

The road led out of Karnak, across the double-tracking of the Atlantic Coast Line's main line, and thence along a dusty road into the heart of Hell Hole swamp. There it veered sharply to the left and a few hundred yards farther on Farnam turned off the county highway to a corduroy roadbed which set the ancient and rusty springs of the antiquated conveyance to groaning.

The exotic surroundings were conducive to silent, intensive thought and for a while—knowing that there were several hours of driving before him—Carroll was content to remain silent as he rehearsed the circumstances surrounding the tragedy which had brought him to South Carolina.

The road itself was agonizing to the strangers from the north. They were jounced and bounced on their poorly cushioned seats as the wheels grated over the sapling road. But the prospect ahead was always beautiful; a grass-grown road hedged on either side by tall, stately pines, and, in the more marshy sections, water oaks and cypress from the branches of which hung great bunches of Spanish moss. The air was clear as crystal, the sun stole through the overlapping tree tops and warmed the pleasantly cool atmosphere. The mosquitoes had virtually disappeared.

Every few hundred rods the road dipped and always at the base of the hollow was a clear, slow-moving branch where the bony nag paused to drink, his nose thrust upstream. The fearful decay of summer seemed to have disappeared. He Hole was at its best this mid-October.

Once in a while a cart, drawn by patient, labouring oxen, went by them, Karnak-bound. Farnam nodded greetings to the drivers, whether they were white or colored. "You seem to know everybody around here," commented Carroll.

"Ought to," grunted the swamp angel in satisfaction. "I been a-livin' hereabouts nigh onto twenty-seven years."

They got through Hell Hole at last, passed through a scattered village of whitewashed houses and then dipped again into another swampy waste. "Santee swamp," volunteered Farnam. "We ain't but about eight miles from Furness Lodge now."

Carroll aroused himself. The somnolent atmosphere had acted almost as an anodyne, and he had business on hand. Mart Farnam was to be quizzed. The detective started abruptly.

"How long has Conrad Heston been in this part of the country?"

Farnam spat vindictively. "Too dum long, I sh'd say."

"Meaning—?"

"Two or three months, I reckon."

"Do you know what he does for a living?"

"No—an' I ain't th' only one that doesn't."

"Writer?"

"Mebbe. An' mebbe not."

"How does he spend his time?"

"Buttin' into other people's affairs. He ain't nowise pop'lar around Santee swamp."

"I judge not. The folks in Karnak seem to like him, though."

"They don't see much of him."

"Do you?"

"Yep."

"Didn't you drive him out when he first came?"

"Yep."

"How did he strike you then?"

"Didn't like him from the fust. Put him down as a snake."

"Why?"

"Dunno. Jus' didn't like him. Reckon a man cain't allers explain why he don't like another feller, can he?"

"But if you are employed by him and he was nice to you—"

"That ain't got nothin' to do with it. I'm a-workin' for you now because you're payin'

me, but when you rent my haws an' buggy, you ain't renting my regard, are you?"

Carroll laughed with frank amusement. "You're a philosopher."

"Thanks," laconically. "Whatever that may be. If it's highbrow—I ain't."

"It's merely the highbrow word for a very common failing. But about Heston—"

"Say-ay. . . ." Farnam twisted his elongated figure in the seat and met Carroll's eyes squarely. "What's gone an' give you the idee that Conrad Heston killed Mrs. Forrest?"

Carroll stiffened suddenly. He heard the sibilant intake of Sullivan's breath. His answer came slowly, his words chosen with care: "What makes you think I believe Heston did it?"

"Huh! I ain't no detective, but I got some sense, I reckon. You didn't start questionin' me about this here Heston just to make talk."

"No-o," gravely, "probably not."

"So I say—what makes you think he done it?"

"I don't think he did it," explained Carroll. "But I do think he was in the locality at that time and therefore had opportunity to do it,

provided there was a reason. Which is why I want you to tell me as much about him as you can."

"I ain't no fair person to tell you about him," returned Farnam quickly. "Him an' me ain't never gee'd a little bit."

"You mean you don't like him?"

"You said it."

"Why?"

Farnam flushed. "I guess there's pussonal reasons. Anyway, I cain't see no good in him an' so I'm tellin' you honest that whatever I say against him oughtn't to count too much. Some day him an' me will get together; that shows you how much I don't like him."

Carroll was puzzled. Here was an unlooked-for honesty. Nor was the man attempting to mislead him. He stole a glance at Farnam's stony profile, he saw the eye. . . . If ever hatred for another was shown on the face of a man, it appeared on Farnam's face at mention of Heston's name.

But what could Conrad Heston, evidently a cultured man, have done to inspire a bitter hatred in the warped soul of the swamp angel? Carroll was at a loss for the answer, and felt

subconsciously that the answer was important. He glanced at Sullivan and detected the gleam of surprised interest in the face of that young man. Obviously Farnam promised to prove more valuable than they had anticipated; he had even forewarned that his opinions were to be discounted.

"Of course," said Carroll, gently, "I don't wish to pry into your personal business—"

"Needn't worry," came the cheerful answer, "I ain't a-goin' to let you."

The detective grinned. "At least I'm thankful for your frankness."

"I'm allers thataway unless I got a lyin' streak on. You know," seriously, "lyin' is a heap o' fun when you can get away with it."

"I take that as a compliment; evidently you don't think you could get away with it now."

"Oh! I dunno. . . . I reckon I'm a pretty slick liar when I want to be."

They were all smiling now. Carroll was amused in spite of himself. Sheriff Potter had spoken truly; Mart Farnam was indeed one of the most interesting characters of a long list of queer acquaintances. Carroll liked the man; he was too typical to be a type.

"Everybody lies," commented Farnam, "but most fellers ain't truthful enough to admit it."

"You're a cheerful cuss."

"Pays best. Ain't no graft in bein' sad. Of course there's times. . . ."

"Thinking of Heston?"

"D. on him!" The exclamation spewed from Farnam involuntarily. His face was momentarily transfigured with hatred. Then he smiled, a wry, twisted smile. "Ef I hear a rattler I jump. You kind of took me offen my guard by mentioning him sudden like that."

"He must be a likeable customer."

"There's folks as think he is," came the answer with a certain dull bitterness. "Listen to me, you fellers; there ain't much use in your questionin' me about this here feller. I said right off an' I say now that I hate him worser'n poison. You-all got the idea that he killed this here woman. I'm tellin' you honest that I wisht t' Gawd you could prove it on him. Ef you need any help, I'll help you. There ain't nothin' in this world would make me much happier than to see him on th' business end of a good stout rope."

"But I don't know as he done it. I ain't

hardly got no reason to think so. All I could swear to was that on the evenin' the woman was killed he was in the woods near the Lodge."

Carroll compelled the other's gaze. "You warned me a few minutes ago that you are an inveterate liar. Am I to believe this?"

Farnam shrugged indifferently. "I'd say the best thing you c'd do would be not to believe anything I say about Heston."

Carroll laughed shortly. The man baffled him. "I'll choose to believe this—" he started when Mart interrupted.

"'Cause you think Heston done it an' you want proof against him," he accused. Carroll flushed.

"Perhaps. You're a good student of human nature, Mart. Where did you see Heston on the afternoon of the ninth?"

"In the woods to the east of the Lodge."

"What was he doing?"

"Nothin'."

"Nothing?"

"Jus' that."

"What time was that?"

"'Bout somewheres around five o'clock or a leetle after, I should say."

"What were you doing there?"

"Walkin' home. As you'll see, the road passes east an' west about three hundred yard or so this side of the house sort of parallel to the river."

"Walking home from Karnak?"

"Nope."

"From where?"

"Nixon's Cross-Roads."

"What was the attraction at Nixon's Cross-Roads?"

"Licker."

"Whiskey?"

"Sort of."

"You drink?"

"Whenever I get a good square chancst."

"And you merely saw him near the cabin at that time?"

"Thet's about all."

"What do you know of Heston's mode of living during the months he's been at Furness Lodge?"

"Nothin' much. He just sort of seemed to have plenty of money and more time. Fished and sat around and fished and sat around some more. He ain't no workin' man."

"Nothin' suspicious in his actions?"

"Cain't say as there was."

"Did he know that the Forrests were coming to the cabin?"

"If he did he was a wonder. Nobody hereabouts knew of it."

"But he had moved from the cabin when they got there?"

"Reckon so. Their shoffer was up the day before. Maybe that's how he knew."

"Did you see the chauffeur when he came?"

"Nope."

"Then you didn't know they were coming until they got here?"

"Nope."

"Then what made you think there was anything suspicious in Heston's being around there that afternoon?"

"Didn't think there was nothin' s'picious 'bout it, or I'd a hung around."

"You merely remember it after you heard of the murder?"

"Yep."

They jogged around a bend in the road. Before them was a vista of interlocking oaks, draped magnificently with the gray moss which

hung in bunches almost reaching to the ground. Far ahead, and coming toward them, was a horse, and as they drew closer Carroll saw that there was a girl upon it.

Even before he could see her face he admired the costume of divided riding skirt and blue-collar'd middy blouse; his eyes glistened with frank admiration at the ease with which she sat her animal. She merged perfectly into the green-gray background, a single spot of colour.

Her mount was galloping easily in the general direction of Karnak, and they approached one another near a wide, shallow branch gloomed over by a score of willows. Quite by accident his eyes left the picture and rested briefly on the face of Mart Farnam.

Gone from Mart's face was the easy, indifferent smile; gone from his manner was the lolling shiftlessness.

His eyes were wide and staring and focussed hungrily on the form of the girl. His figure had stiffened, every muscle taut. His uninjured right hand grasped the reins so tightly that the veins stood out. He was leaning forward in his seat expectantly.

The buggy and the girl drew close to one another. And just before they passed Mart Farnam raised his hand and removed his battered felt hat with a flourish.

“Evenin’, Esther.”

The girl looked at him. She looked *through* him. She galloped by without a sign that she had seen Farnam, the buggy or the occupants of the buggy!

For a few moments Farnam’s face grew beet-red. Then the color receded leaving a deathly pallor. His sinewy frame shook as though with palsy, his feet scraped a bit. . . .

Carroll turned to gaze after the girl. He had been amazed by her virile beauty. She was an exotic in this drear waste. And Farnam. . . .

The eyes of the swamp angel were fixed on nothing. They were narrowed, now; a bitter glance staring out from under half-closed lids. For a while no one spoke, and it was Carroll who broke the silence—broke it because he had to, and seeking to be as tactful as possible under the circumstances.

“Mighty pretty girl, wasn’t she, Sullivan? By the way, Mart, who is she?”

Farnam moistened his lips with his tongue.
"She—she—" He choked, then began over:
"She's the reason I hate Conrad Heston!"

CHAPTER VIII

“**C**HERCHEZ *la femme!*” The words slipped from the tight-pressed lips of Jim Sullivan and reverberated in Carroll’s ears. Find the woman! Here, at least, they had found *a* woman; a woman in some way mixed up with the mysterious Conrad Heston.

But what a woman. In the cases they had worked together David Carroll and Jim Sullivan had encountered many a type; from the frigid cruel siren to the sophisticated debutante . . . but this girl whom Mart Farnam addressed as “Esther” and whose destiny seemed intertwined with that of the man they sought, was different.

The glimpse of her had shown that she was pretty in a strikingly vital way; clean and clear-blooded, patently out of place in her environment—a fact evident even to David Carroll to whom the environment was novel. Memory of her nut-brown hair curling about a high white

forehead; of clear hazel eyes and rounded cheeks in which there were tiny spots of color; of perfect curves shown by her riding habit . . . all of that remained with David Carroll. What right, then, had this man by his side, this elongated, ignorant, moonshine-swilling swamp-angel to gaze upon her with the eyes of love. For Carroll had seen enacted a bit of drama which spoke plainly of hopeful if unrequited passion.

For some time there was silence in the battered buggy as it clattered along the corduroy roadbed. The grim silence of the forest enfolded them like a muffling mantle. But Carroll was too vitally interested from a personal, as well as a professional, standpoint, to allow the matter to drop where it was.

“You have known her long?”

To his surprise Mart Farnam answered frankly. It was almost as though he was eager to speak of her to some one. “I been knowin’ her all my life.”

“She is very attractive.”

“You tellin’ *me* that?” The man laughed harshly. “I guess I knowed it long ago. I been aimin’ to marry her this past two years!”

The declaration grated on Carroll's ears.
"You've been engaged to her?"

"No-o," grudgingly, "not exactly. But I an' her old man sort of fixed it up long ago."

"You're neighbours?"

"Yep. Live a couple of miles from each other."

"What is her name?"

"Esther. Esther Devarney."

"She looks—different from the women I've seen since yesterday."

"She is different. That's why she ain't never cottoned to me much."

There was a simple dignity in the man's manner which ill befitted him, but commanded respect.

"And Heston?" suggested Carroll, softly.

The bruised fingers of Mart Farnam's left hand balled into a bony fist. He seemed oblivious to the pain the action must have caused. "He's more her kind. She's been sort of highbrow sence her old man sent her to school down to Charleston."

"Educated, eh?"

"Yep. Plenty of book-learnin'. It sort of got high-falutin' notions into her head, an'

sence she graduated there she cain't sort of seem to fit into her home no more. Ain't none of the folks around here seem to understand her. They say I'd be foolish to marry her, seein' as she wouldn't never be contented and we'd allers be unhappy. But that ain't getting around the fact, Mr. Carroll, that I want to marry her an' that I hate the man who took her from me."

"Conrad Heston?"

"Yep. He's the one. That's why I hate him. He ain't my kind. I guess you'll understand him better'n I do. He's got book-learnin', too; and from the time he got here first-off an' met her, they been that thick. But you know well as I do that he ain't the marryin' kind—not where a girl like her is concerned."

"You don't mean—?"

"Yes," bitterly, "I do mean—jes' that. She's been goin' to his place day after day sence he's been a-livin' there. He's been a-makin' love to her. An' if he'd been fixin' to marry her, there's been plenty of chance. I met her 'bout three days ago—"

"The ninth?"

"Yes. I met her then an' I told her even

after what'd happened I cared for her an' was willin' to marry her if she'd drop him. I tol' her that—that was what I was willin' to do. An' she—she laughed at me!"

Carroll said nothing. Obviously, there was nothing to say.

"Do you wonder I'd like to see him swing?" questioned Mart Farnam, softly. "D'you wonder?"

Carroll shook his head. "No. But maybe you're wrong."

"Yes—and mebbe it's pitch black night now; but it ain't and *I* ain't. But I'm jus' sayin' again what I said before; I hate that man an' what I say about him an' this case ain't to be counted on too much. I'd lie against him ef I seen a good chance to make him swing, I guess; an' even if I wasn't lyin', mebbe I'd been seein' things against him as wasn't there." He drew a deep breath. "If you don't mind, Mister Carroll, I'd like for us to talk about somethin' else."

Conversation lagged. The bony old horse plodded ahead quietly. The wheels turned over slowly in their bed of heavy dirt. The vegetation grew fresher. And then suddenly they

rounded a curve in the road and through the trees they saw a vista of water; a stream wide and sluggish and a dirty, rust-red in colour.

"Santee River," volunteered Farnam. "We ain't so far from the Lodge."

The road mounted slowly to one of those near-rises which in southeastern South Carolina are termed hills. The corduroying gave place to a natural sandy roadbed which made the going easier, and the vegetation took on a healthier, more normal colour.

And finally they stopped before an old stone pair of gateposts between which swung a heavy iron gate. Stretching away toward the river for a distance of about three or four hundred yards was an avenue of poplars, straight and tall and stately and framing a small, very attractive little cypress and gum cabin at the other end. It appeared very tiny as viewed from the road, and the picture, springing as it did from a veritable wilderness through which they had been driving for hours, brought involuntary exclamations of admiration from both of the detectives.

The foliage of oaks and of the shrubbery was touched with the first golden colouring which

comes with autumn. The pines reared their stately forms through the grounds, impervious to the cooling off of the weather. Through the trees, one could see the Santee, flowing eastward toward the Atlantic; impassively, unhurriedly . . . as though typifying the people of its state.

Throughout his drive Carroll had been wondering at the mental perversion which had prompted Franklin Furness to select a spot in this God-forsaken country as an abode of inspiration. Now he understood. Furness Lodge was beautiful enough to attract attention anywhere. Set as it was, in the midst of the swampland, it reminded him of a brilliant set in iron that its brilliancy might show to better advantage.

To the west from the gateway stretched the road over which they had just driven. To the right it wound in a general southeasterly direction toward the settlement where Mart Farnam and the Devarneys lived. Farnam alighted and proffered his services as guide. Carroll waved him aside.

"Don't think so, Mart. Much obliged just the same. I'd rather look over the scene with

Mr. Sullivan—just the pair of us. Not that we don't appreciate your offer—"

Mart shrugged. "Have it your own way. If you want me—call me."

"Call you?"

"Yep. I got a 'phone on the country line, you see running through here. I live 'bout four miles beyond here. My ring is two longs, a short and a long. Better be careful how you talk when you get me, too, because listenin' in is the chief sport hereabouts."

Carroll smiled easily. "Thanks, Mart. You've helped us a good bit. Do you happen, by the way, to know the ring of the 'phone at the Lodge?"

"Two shorts an' two longs. That's what it used to be when the line was workin'."

"Good. Well, we'll be going. . . ."

"Jus' one more word, Mr. Carroll, an' then I'll be moseyin'. This here river runs due east for a mile or so, then it turns off 'most due south. It runs down by near where I live. But just where the bend comes is a little cabin." He stopped short and turned away.

"What about the cabin?" asked Carroll.

"Nothin'. Nothin'—only if you was to ask

me where Conrad Heston would most likely be found, I'd sort of guess that there was it."

He swung one ungainly leg to the step and heaved himself into the buggy. The broken whip slapped against the dashboard and he murmured a nasal "Heo—you!" The disconsolate horse started off down the road, and the two detectives stood staring after the buggy and its strange occupant until they were lost in a turn of the road.

Jim Sullivan drew a deep breath and exhaled with a fervent whistle. "If it don't beat the Dutch!"

"Farnam?"

"Who else?"

"He is just about the queerest bird I've ever run across. What do you think of him?"

"Just that."

"What?"

"Queer."

"And honest."

"The most thoroughly honest liar I've ever met."

"How much do you think he knows?" questioned Carroll.

"About all there is to know concerning Heston."

"Do you think he's told it all?"

"Just about. He's certainly told enough."

"Pretty nearly. Summarized he admits that he hates Heston and would like to prove him guilty of the murder. He says that Heston was near the scene of the crime shortly before it occurred. He also insinuates that Heston isn't any too careful of his morals where women are concerned."

"Speaking of that girl—Esther Devarney?"

"Yes."

"I should gamble," said Sullivan, "that he thinks he's right and that he's dead wrong. You saw the girl yourself."

"I agree with you. Men of his breed are inclined to impute sinister things where there is no thought of other than decency. And yet. . . ."

"And yet in our business every one is black until we prove him white; is that what you were going to say?"

"It's what you accused me of almost forgetting last night."

"Probably so. But you've trained me too well, Chief. I looked into that girl's eyes, and even while I admit that Mart Farnam believes what he says—I'm willing to bet my shirt that his conclusions are wrong."

"I'm with you on that. But, after all, our investigation has nothing to do with Mart Farnam or Esther Devarney or their love affairs."

"But you can't get them out of your mind, eh?"

Carroll grinned sheepishly. "That's about the size of it. The girl haunts me. Pretty as a painting, and yet there was something in her eyes. . . ."

"Tragedy."

The other shrugged. "Let's forget her for awhile, Jim; and try to remember the boy back yonder in the Karnak jail. Professionally the girl only interests me insofar as she is mixed up with Conrad Heston. Let's get busy."

They started slowly up the poplar-lined walk. Sullivan shook his head. His words came softly, almost as though he were speaking to himself:

"I've more than an even hunch, Chief, that we'll see aplenty of Conrad Heston and that girl before we're finished."

Carroll stopped short and flashed his assistant a startled glance.

"By Jove, Jim," he ejaculated, "I was thinking that very thing as you spoke."

CHAPTER IX

FURNESS LODGE, prettily constructed of unfinished cypress and gum logs, rests comfortably on the crest of a knoll on the southern bank of the Santee River. It is an unpretentious place: four rather small rooms, two on each side of a wide, doorless hall extending from front porch to back and known, in the vernacular of the swamps, as a "dog-trot."

To the right of the dog-trot, facing toward the river, is a bedroom, next to that a well equipped bathroom and opening thence into another bedroom. Both bedrooms are comfortably furnished with plain, white enamel. Water for the entire house is pumped from a deep well equipped with a windmill . . . a bit out of order through disuse, but nevertheless sufficiently serviceable.

To the left of the dog-trot on the front is the combination dining room, and living room, plainly furnished in fumed oak. Behind that is a nicely arranged, small kitchen. The rear

the cabin. Carroll stopped, and bent his eyes intently on the two wooden steps leading from the ground to the dog-trot.

"See there, Jim."

It was perfectly plain; two large splotches outlined in red, and undoubtedly made by the large shoes of the murderer. The outlines of the footprints were not clear, but they were sufficiently impressed to establish the fact that the man had worn a large shoe. Sullivan put his hand on the screen door leading to the dog-trot, but Carroll stopped him.

"One thing at a time, Jim. I'd like to see if these tracks prove anything."

He turned away and followed the tracks as best he could for perhaps fifty yards. They were very faint and indistinct on the pine-needle covered ground, but they showed something and Carroll quizzed his assistant. "What do you make of 'em, Jim?"

Sullivan frowned a bit. "They're not very clear, Chief, but it strikes me that they were made by a large foot and that the man who made them walked toward the house and ran away."

"Why so?"

"Wherever there is enough dirt for the foot-

prints to register they show fairly plainly the imprint of the heels; heels which I should say were considerably run down on the outer edges. On the reverse tracks there are no heel marks at all. Instead they show the tips of the broad toes very plainly, which would seem to indicate that the man, whoever he was, was running and running fast; running on his toes and digging into the turf. Are those your conclusions?"

Carroll smiled. "I sometimes think you're a heap better at that sort of thing than I am, Jim. Yes—I saw that and got the same idea."

"You're going to follow the tracks?"

"I'm not going to try."

"Why not?"

"Useless. They're faint enough close to the house. Farther out we should be able to make nothing of them and probably get on a false scent. I fancy that these will give us all the pedal information we'll need. Later, if we choose to examine. . . ."

They walked back to the house, carefully avoiding the faintly outlined tracks. Carroll dropped to his knees at the two back steps and examined the blood stains closely.

"Undoubtedly made by feet," he commented,

half to himself. "I should say that the murderer fidgeted around, stepped in the blood and then ran."

"Which would indicate," vouchsafed Sullivan, slowly, "that he did not simply strike the blow and run?"

"Exactly. Now—inside."

Carroll put out his hand and shoved the screen door. It swung open from the left. The two men stepped gingerly on the dog-trot. They found themselves gazing straight through the house, across the front veranda and out upon the river beyond. To the right they could see through the partly opened door of a bedroom which had apparently not been used. Everything in front and to the right was orderly.

But the same was not true of the veranda to the left of where they stood.

Backed up against the wall, with its outer edge perhaps three feet from the left of the screen door, was an ice-chest, closed. It was a plain affair of golden oak. To the right of the ice-chest, and also against the wall, was a rude kitchen table. On the floor, between table and ice-chest was an ice-pick.

Carroll stooped quickly and picked it up. He

held it gingerly in the palm of his left hand and Sullivan, too, fastened his eyes upon it.

It was a plain, cheap ice-pick, evidently new. Its handle was of wood. "Worse luck," commented Sullivan.

"Why so?"

"No chance for fingerprints."

"Never mind that. It has undoubtedly been handled considerably since the crime anyway. So again we're saved from false clues."

The blade of the ice-pick was long and very sharp. Its pristine polish was splotched with deep, red stains. It was red almost to the wooden knob which did duty as a handle. Plainly the bride's assailant had possessed great strength and had used it vindictively.

On the floor in front of the ice-box, the yard of distance between the box and the screen door, was confusion. The floor boarding was stained a dark, ugly red; the brownish color of clotted blood. And through the stains something glistened. The two detectives bent over intently.

Scattered about on the floor were bits of broken glass; some tiny, some of considerable proportions. Carroll lifted his head. There

was no window near. Then Sullivan's fingers closed about something and he extended it to the other.

"There's the answer, Chief."

Carroll took it from him. It was a long slender bottle neck and a bit of the bottle itself. Still sticking to it was a scrap of green-gold label. A careful search resulted in the finding of other bits of glass and a patching together of enough of the label to see what it had originally been.

"A bottle of imported olive oil," commented Carroll. "Probably fell."

He rose and inspected the ice-chest. Down the front of it was a streak, greasy to the touch. Carroll raised the cover of the chest. In one spot was a pronounced smear of the olive oil and in it hundreds of bits of smashed glass. The oil, too, had trickled down the interior of the ice compartment. Carroll spoke softly, as though to himself:

"She was evidently standing at the ice-chest with her back to that door," he said, "when the assassin entered. I should guess that she had laid the ice-pick either on the ice-box or else on that table yonder. She was probably

making ready to prepare a mayonnaise or French dressing and had taken the olive oil from the ice compartment and stood it on the ledge.

"Then, if I'm right, the murderer struck from behind with the ice-pick and the top to the ice-box—" He raised it and released his grasp. It fell with a bang. "—fell. It won't stay up by itself. The oil bottle was smashed to bits and the oil trickled inside and outside and splashed for a considerable distance. See. . ." He designated several splotches several feet away from the ice-box. "How does that strike you, Jim?"

"Sound as a dollar."

"And now, let's see what else we can find." He turned and examined the walls, floor and screen door closely. Then he faced his assistant. "Do me a favor, Jim. Stand with your face to the ice-box. Hold the cover up with your left hand. Bend over. Put the ice-pick on the edge of the table yonder. You can reach it from where you're standing, can't you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now hold it."

Carroll stepped outside. He walked toward the veranda, pushed open the door softly, stood

motionless for a second, tiptoed to the table, seized the ice-pick and made a terrific stab at Sullivan.

"Now," he said, softly, "let the cover fall." The thing crashed down. "I'm standing here," went on Carroll, intently; "I must have been very close to you . . . so your body falls, we'll say, across my feet. I drop the ice-pick and lift you. Then I realize what I've done, become panic-stricken and turn to run. . . ." He rose suddenly to his feet, whirled, seized the screen door with his right hand and jerked it open. As he did so and started through he narrowly missed hitting his head against the edge of the screen door. He went down the two steps, and ran off for a few feet in the general direction of the shrubbery to the eastward of the Lodge. Then he returned, forehead creased in thought. "Strike you all right, Jim?"

"Just about. You think there was a gush of blood as her body hit the floor, that he walked in it, left stains on the soles of his shoes, which showed on the steps?"

"That is undoubtedly what occurred insofar as the stains are concerned. At any rate, that's about as close as we can come to acting out the

crime at this stage of the game. Now let's look around the rest of the house."

They went over every foot of the dog-trot with meticulous care. Mary had evidently started in as an immaculate housekeeper. Save for the dust which had gathered since the day of the tragedy everything was in order. The same showed in the kitchen—save for the pathetic, partially-prepared meal on the range; some of it burned to a crisp, but other dishes remaining on the table where they had been placed ready to serve; a deep dish of lettuce with sliced tomatoes on top; the contents of a can of luncheon tongue on a small platter, the whole garnished with choice lettuce leaves; biscuits too much browned . . . a trifle scorched in fact. A bride's first cooking. The sight brought a lump to David Carroll's throat. Everything just as she had left it a few moments before meeting her death; everything betokening supreme happiness and a blissful ignorance of the ineluctable horror awaiting her a few feet away.

He led the way quickly into the dining room; the small table neatly laid with bridal napery and wedding-present silver. Without pausing

he crossed to the neat bedroom. He examined the room closely, unconsciously writhing at the touch of the garments—sheer and soft—which had gone to make up Mary's tresseau and which were hanging in a small closet. There were Forrest's clothes, too. The whole spoke of permanency, of unalloyed happiness.

"Do you mean to tell me," Carroll broke out suddenly, "that you can still believe Stan read that letter and went this far in his preparations for happiness here?"

Sullivan shook his head. "No, David. But, as I suggested before, it is possible, you know, that he didn't read that letter until later—when he was fishing down by the river and she was preparing supper."

"Even so," snapped Carroll, "wouldn't he have entered through the front door had he come up from the river? The man who killed her came from the very opposite direction and left that way."

"So we think—so, maybe, we both believe. But footprints cannot be counted on too much, David."

They went over every square inch of the two bedrooms; of the dog-trot for a second time, of

the kitchen. They returned to the dining room once more. Sullivan started in one corner and Carroll in the other. They went on hands and knees.

A cry broke from Carroll. He leaped to his feet and crossed to his assistant.

"Look!" he exclaimed, his eyes blazing with excitement. "Look at this, Jim. It was near the corner there, hidden under the rug."

He placed in Sullivan's hand a handsome two-karat solitaire diamond ring. The Tiffany setting was of platinum. Sullivan stared at it curiously and then raised his eyes to Carroll.

"Well?" he asked.

"It is an engagement ring," breathed Carroll. "And inside you will see engraved: G. R. A. to K. C. Those initials belong to neither Stanford or his wife."

"No-o, David; they don't. Nor do they belong to any one else we know!"

CHAPTER X

THE men stared into each other's eyes. Then their stares dropped to the solitaire in David Carroll's hand. Carroll laughed a bit nervously. "It's uncanny, Jim. A clue of this sort. Didn't really believe that it happened any more."

"It does look providential. Even though we cannot identify the initials."

"It won't be so very difficult to trace this ring—especially in the wilds here. The first thing, however, is to telephone into Karnak to the Sheriff to find out whether Stan knows the ring."

"You might also ask him to send Carter out in the auto."

"Thinking of searching for Heston, eh?"

"Yes."

"So was I. The car will be useful in any event."

Five minutes later he had returned from the telephone. "Potter was very nice about it,—

said he'd ask Stan and 'phone me right away. Didn't ask any embarrassing questions either. I like that man, Jim. He's on the level all the way."

"Solid."

"He'll send Carter out, too, he says. I told him to tell the man to drive as fast as the road allowed. He ought to be here in an hour. Meanwhile, let's continue our search. There may be other things of interest."

In a few minutes the telephone rang insistently; two shorts and two longs. Carroll leaped to the receiver, and heard others click all along the line, the rural community engaged in its principal sport of listening in. "Hello."

"That you, Carroll?"

"Yes."

"Asked that question—you understand. . . . I've got to talk in riddles."

"I understand."

"Your friend says he knows nothing about it. Says the one he gave to her was gold with a small brilliant stone."

"Ever hear of those initials yourself, Sheriff?"

"No. I've been thinking them over. I'm

pretty nearly willing to swear they don't fit any one around these parts. Which indicates—"

Carroll laughed shortly. "Exactly what I've been thinking. I'll look the gentleman up this evening. Has Carter left?"

"Saw him breaking the speed ordinance across the railroad track three minutes ago. Barring a breakdown he'll be with you in record time."

Carroll found his assistant seated in a wicker chair on the front veranda staring riverward through a haze of cigar smoke.

"Those initials," said Sullivan, abruptly, "are not Heston's."

"No," agreed Carroll, "but the ring may be."

"And it may prove nothing."

"Or everything. Initials of that sort indicate something else . . . and if they don't go any farther than to serve eventually to identify Mr. Conrad Heston, they will have done their bit—and more."

"Then you think he's under an alias?"

"I feel sure of it. Oh! I plead guilty to your indictment of allowing myself to be more or less swayed by personal interest in this case . . . and also that I have predetermined that

Heston knows more about the murder than he'll be glad to admit; but the facts are nevertheless facts.

"We have a man who is, by all we can judge, a chap of fair front and polish, coming down to a God-forsaken spot, lying about ownership of a deserted place regarding which he must have had information in advance and which he could not have gotten save by personal knowledge of Franklin Furness—"

"Or Bennet Hemingway," interpolated Sullivan, mildly. Carroll stopped short and flashed him a startled glance. "By George, Jim! you're right again. Hemingway had slipped my mind."

"Hemingway knew all about the place, and Hemingway isn't exactly bothered with scruples. But anyway, as you were saying—"

"Heston had some sort of advance knowledge about the place. He had more or less money. He has been living a secluded life here and without satisfying the public as to what he does for a living. All of that is suspicious. He must have had a reason. He must have been eager to lose himself for awhile. The circumstances indicate that almost incontrovertibly.

"Therefore, as Franklin Furness knows no Conrad Heston, and as the initials on the ring—the man's initials—are G. R. A., I would be willing to wager that those initials belong rightfully to Heston."

"You are convinced that the ring belonged to him."

"Inductively convinced—yes."

"Well, . . ." Sullivan shrugged, "I agree with everything you have said. Just wanted to make talky-talk. Meanwhile, I'd like to skirmish a little grub. I'm hungry enough to eat tenpenny nails."

They prepared a tasty lunch from the stores collected by Stanford Forrest and his ill-starred bride. They ate with a relish inspired by the clear, appetizing pine air, and when they finished they returned to the front porch, lighted cigars, and cocked their feet up on the veranda rail.

They talked the case over and Carroll announced that he intended to visit Esther Devarney. "She may know something about the ring."

"Connected her with it because you think it is his and is an engagement ring?"

"Perhaps. She will be worth talking to any way."

"You know where she lives?"

"I know where that chap—what's his name. . . ."

"Farnam."

"—Where Mart Farnam lives and he can, and probably will cheerfully, direct us to her place."

Less than forty minutes later the sound of a rhythmically purring motor with its muffler cut out, came to their ears. They rose and made their way through the dog-trot, down the two back steps and across the drive to where Carter stood beside the big car. "Very hard trip, sir, Mr. Carroll, but I pushed the boat to her best speed."

Carroll glanced at his watch. "That's evident. Ready to drive on a few miles further?"

"Little water in the radiator, sir. I'll have to drain this out; she got pretty hot, sir, going a good deal of the way in second." Later, when he returned, Carroll handed him the diamond ring which had been found in the cabin.

"Answer carefully, Carter—have you ever seen this ring before?"

The chauffeur raised a placid face to the detective after giving the ring a close scrutiny.

"No, sir, I'm quite sure I have not."

"Nor one closely resembling it?"

"No, sir."

"Very well." He climbed into the tonneau followed by Sullivan. On the face of the latter there was a queer, puzzled look. Carroll noticed it. "What's eating you, Jim?"

"Nothing." Shortly.

"Yes, there is." Their dialogue was kept from the ears of the driver by the fresh roar of the engine. "Come across."

"It's Carter. He was too durned ready with his disclaimer."

"Good Lord! you're not suspecting him?"

"I suspect everybody."

"But Stan himself exonerates Carter, even if the idea was otherwise tenable."

"David Carroll, this case has robbed you of every bit of perception and reasoning power you have ever had. You're too damned human. Hasn't it struck you that if we presume Carter is the guilty man, he could have reached the house, killed the woman, left the house and then returned to it after Forrest got there?"

"Maybe you're right, Jim. I'm afraid my personal interest distorts my perspective. Thank goodness for your level head. As to Carter, we'll let it go that I believe him innocent."

"You believe that because you wish him to be. Which is your reason for dropping Stanford Forrest from your calculations. Conrad Heston is impersonal, a stranger, and in all probability a crook . . . so you have fastened on him. And thus far you haven't advanced one theory as to what his motive could have been."

"I may do that after I have seen Heston," answered Carroll calmly, not at all ruffled by the frankness of his friend and assistant. His nuance caused Sullivan to turn in surprise.

"You've been bunking me, David. You have an idea already!"

"Have I?"

"You have. I know you and your symptoms too well to doubt it. What have you found that you haven't told me?"

"Nothing."

"You will admit that you have a theory?"

"No."

"Will you deny it?"

"No."

"You— Oh! confound you, David!" And Jim Sullivan turned away.

For about a mile the road, running in a general south-easterly direction, was fairly smooth going. Then it dipped into a stretch of bottom-land, soggy and marshy. Here the gray moss grew thicker, the vegetation was more stunted and weary, the branches larger and more numerous. In another mile they had plunged once more into the hopeless swamp country; the outskirts of Santee Swamp. They rode through the swamp for another two miles before the ground showed signs of elevation, and at length they came to an extensive pine knoll on which were a few scattered cabins and a whitewashed country store. A half dozen negroes in various hues of clothing, loafed candidly about and stared at the big touring car. Carroll beckoned to one of them, an ancient negro with grizzled white hair. He flipped him a quarter.

"Uncle, can you tell us where Mart Farnam lives?"

"Sho' now, Boss. Is yo' wantin' to see Marse Farnam?"

"Yes. Does he live near here?"

"Deed he do, Boss. Yes, indeedy he do."

"Can you show me where?"

"Laws a' massy, Boss; Ol' Uncle Zack knows whar ev'y man in Santee lives. I useter wuk fo' Marse Farnam's daddy, suh; dat was befo' de wah eben—or no, mebbe, 'twas he gran' . . ."

"How far is it from here?" interrupted Carroll.

"'Tain't fuh, not s've'y fuh. 'Bout a qua'ter mile."

"Which direction?"

"Right as yo' goin' suh; right as yo' goin'."

"Good." And then another thought came to Carroll. "Where do the Devarneys live?"

"Devarneys?" The old negro chuckled with toothless humor. "Lawsy, Boss, Devarneys is de onliest t'ing dey ain't nothin' else aroun' heah but. Which Devarneys does yo' mean?"

Carroll took a big black cigar from his pocket. "Like good tobacco, Uncle?"

The old man's eyes glistened at sight of the gold band.

"Dat's de fondest t'ing I'm of."

"Then answer this one question and answer it

straight. Where does Miss Esther Devarney live?"

Results were eminently satisfactory. "In dat white an' green cabin 'bout a half mile back, suh. Yo' must ob passed it on yo' left as you drob' in."

Carroll tossed him the cigar and directed Carter to drive to Mart Farnam's cabin. They found it at length; a dirty, ramshackle little place of logs and weatherboarding nestling against a background of willow and cypress trees. The front door was open chronically, thanks to the defection of its upper hinge, and protruding from the doorway they could see a pair of very large feet and Carroll grinned. "Our man is at home, Jim. There's no mistaking those feet."

Farnam was at home and Farnam was asleep. Carroll stepped within the cabin and shook the big swamp angel. Mart came to his feet, blinking with sleep. Then he recognized his visitor, and he nodded. "Howdye, Mr. Carroll; how you makin' it?"

"Very well. Let's step outside. That pipe of yours has got this place smelling to high heaven."

Farnam preceded him to the open air and Carroll flashed a keen glance about the squalid interior. The place was dirty and ill-kept. A battered cook stove stood in the far corner, and on it a few greasy, malodorous pots and pans. A ham hung near the broken window and a long bundle which Carroll conjectured contained a slab of bacon, was next to it. A few cans and jars stood on a dangerously leaning shelf built on one rude wall and a bucket containing drinking water and a dipper with a broken handle perched precariously on a rickety bench. The air within the cabin was close and fetid, and the rude cot with its crazy-quilts massed above it, looked as though it had not been properly made for a year.

And yet this was the man who had presumed to hopefully aspire to the hand of the beautiful, lithe-limbed girl they had passed that morning. Carroll drew a deep breath as he hastened to the sweet air outside and joined Sullivan and the lanky swampman.

"What you wantin' of me?" queried Mart, directly.

"Information you'll probably be glad to give," returned Carroll promptly. "Tell me

just exactly how we can reach this cabin where you think Conrad Heston is staying."

At mention of the name, Carroll saw Mart's eyes narrow involuntarily and a spasm set his facial muscles to twitching. But the man controlled himself and answered with his habitual good-humoured drawl.

"Drive right back the way you come 'twell you come to a cross-roads. Your road back is the left, but to get to his place you turn off the right fork. I don't hardly reckon that there autymobile of yourn can go more'n a couple of hundred yards up there. But jes' keep up that road 'til you git to the river, an' there you'll see it. It's the only house thereabouts."

Carroll thanked him and they drove away. Turning back while still within sight of the cabin, Carroll saw the big man motionless before his hut staring after them. He shrugged and gave his attention to the road which was rough again under their wheels.

They reached the cross-roads and found that Mart had prophesied truly. The road was impassable for any motor vehicle save perhaps an adventuresome flivver. To that end Carroll and Sullivan got out and walked.

In the midst of a grove of magnificent oaks with their gray draping of Spanish moss, they found the cabin; a tiny affair which at best could not have contained more than two rooms. One glance at the door was sufficient. There was a heavy padlock on the door and the lock was fastened. Obviously there was no one inside. Their knocks were unanswered. And when they turned away Carroll set the pace. Carter had turned the car and was awaiting them.

"Back to the village we just came from, Carter, and drive as fast as the car will stand."

They shot head, bumping dangerously over the corduroy roadbed. Sullivan glanced curiously at his chief. "What's the big idea?"

But Carroll didn't answer. When they reached the country store, he leaped to the ground and motioned Sullivan to follow. Once inside he made his way to the telephone and gave the ring for the Sheriff's office. Almost immediately Potter's gruff, good-natured "Hello" boomed back to him over the quavery wire.

"Sheriff?"

"Yes."

"This is David Carroll."

"Yes?"

"I want you to do me a particular favor."

"It's yours for the asking, sir."

"You and your men keep a sharp lookout. If Conrad Heston comes into Karnak this evening, and especially if he tries to get away on the train—arrest him, will you? I'll swear out the warrant as soon as I reach town."

"You think—"

"I think he's likely to try a getaway this evening. Will you promise to hold him?"

"Yes, sir," came the hearty response, "I shuah will, sir."

CHAPTER XI

FACING each other on the road again Sullivan questioned: "Why so, Chief?"

"Playing a hunch—that's all."

"You think he'll try a getaway?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm convinced that even if he did not kill Mary he has a record which don't banker after investigation by professional detectives. If I'm wrong in that I may be wrong in all the rest of it. But his whole manner of living from the time he came here under false pretences is in bad odour. And undoubtedly he had heard of our presence here."

Sullivan shrugged. "You may be right, Chief. And now—?"

"Miss Esther Devarney."

They left Carter and the automobile near the little store, stared at curiously by many eyes as they made their way toward the Devarney cabin. They came upon it suddenly, set well back from the road under a natural canopy of

live oak branches. A thin curl of smoke issued from the rock chimney. But although there was nothing distinctive in the ramshackle place itself, the neat flower beds before the tiny veranda with their carefully cultivated fall roses and chrysanthemums led Sullivan to declare that he could have located the place without directions. "That girl on the horse," he said, "is the only person I've met since leaving Karnak who looked as though she might care about flowers and appearances."

"And," said Carroll, dryly, "the cabin is a bit different, because of the flowers and cleanliness, from that reeking place of Mart Farnam's."

As they approached the shack a figure appeared in the doorway; a woman's figure. She was forty and looked sixty, withered and worn, a face which gave evidence of once having been pretty now wrinkled and seamed with hardship; all signs of figure disappeared: graying, wispy hair combed viciously back from a high forehead and screwed into an uncompromising knot. The woman was small and slender. Her eyes were narrow and hopeless as though the horror of the swamp had long since dulled their out-

look on life. Skinny arms and bony elbows protruded from rolled-up sleeves of spotted gingham and her long, slender fingers were calloused with work.

She stood in the doorway, an excellent subject for the stark frame; and eyed the strangers with something akin to hostility. She said nothing until Carroll spoke: "Is this Mrs. Devarney?"

The answer came in a shrill, nasal voice. "Yes."

"You are the mother of Miss Esther Devarney?"

"Whut's thet to you?"

"We knew there are several Devarney families around here and we wanted to be sure we had the right place. We wished to speak with Miss Esther a moment."

Without turning her head the woman's voice shrilled into the dark confines of the cabin. "Father!"

"Huh. . . ." From within.

"Heah's two men wantin' to see Essie."

There was a scraping sound, as of a chair being dragged across the floor, and then Carroll started. A huge man; bearded, unkempt, deep

of chest and broad of shoulder, towered behind the little woman. Eyes, grayed and squinted by years of torrid sun and swirling dust, peered with frank curiosity at the strangers.

"Whut you fellers be a-wantin' with my darter?"

Carroll and Sullivan walked closer and the former dropped his voice as he flashed the full power of his winning smile on the big man. "We just wanted to chat with her awhile. A personal matter."

"Whut about?"

"Just something personal."

"Who be ye?"

"We're friends of Mr. Forrest—"

The gray eyes flashed: "The man whut killed his wife over to th' Furness place?"

"What makes you think he killed her, Mr. Devarney?"

"Course he did. Ev'ybody says so, an' I don't hardly reckon ev'ybody's wrong."

"They might be." Carroll was thoroughly self-possessed. His manner was easy and deliberately friendly. "When do you expect Miss Esther at home?"

"I ain't said she wasn't here now, hev I?"

"No. But it wasn't necessary."

"Y'r a right smart feller, aint ye? I reckon you must be them two 'tectives I been a-hearin' 'bout, eh?"

"Yes."

"Thet bein' the case, whut you want with my darter?"

"Should I be honest with you, Mr. Devarney?"

"They say thet's th' healthiest way whar I'm consarned."

"What I'm after," said Carroll boldly, "is to find out something about Conrad Heston!"

Devarney's form shook violently as though in a sudden paroxysm. Mrs. Devarney put her hands to her lips as though to hold an exclamation back forcibly. "I told ye, Seth," she quavered; "I tol' ye there wouldn't be nothin' but harm come of her knowin' thet man."

"Shut up!" came the growling command. Keen eyes bored into the mildly inquiring ones of Carroll. "Whut you want with Conrad Heston?"

"Nothing—except to chat with him."

"Why don't you go where he's livin'?"

"Where is that?"

"The Furness place, ain't it?"

"Is it?"

A puzzled look came over the other's face.

"He *was* a-livin' thar."

"He isn't staying there now," returned Carroll. "When the Forrests came he moved to a little cabin right near the bend of the river."

"It's his'n."

"You're sure?"

"Yep. I witnessed the deed when he bought it from Sam Raines."

"May I ask you one frank question without fearing to offend? You needn't answer it if you don't wish to . . . and I won't ask it unless you'll promise not to get sore."

"I got a purty thick hide."

"Very well, then. It is this:—hasn't your daughter been pretty friendly with Conrad Heston?"

Devarney stared. "I'll answer that if ye'll answer me one:—Hev you got the idee that mebbe this here Heston is mixed up in the Forrest murder?"

"What gives you that idea?"

"I ain't no fool, stranger. When two detectives come out an' show sech a heap of int'rest

in a strange man it's did with a purpose. Will you answer my question?"

"Yes. Not that we necessarily suspect Heston of anything; but as he has been living in the Furness cabin for some time we imagined that he might be able to give us some valuable information. Now how about the answer to my question?" Carroll was concentrating in the effort to win the confidence and liking of these forbidding persons. His success, as shown by Devarney's answer, surprised him.

"I like your looks, young feller, an' there's some things I'm a-kinder hankerin' to git offen my chest.

"Fust off, my gal has been too all-fired friendly with that man . . . not that there's been anything wrong. I'd 'a killed him long ago ef I thought that, spite of what a certain other man thinks—"

"Mart Farnam?"

"Whut you know 'bout Mart Farnam and my gal?"

"Merely that he's in love with her and that she turned him down."

"Yeh . . . she tu'ned him down; went right against my orders. Not that I'm thinkin' Mart

is any very fine match, but mebbe with me for a father-in-law he might be afraid to keep on as shiftless as he's allers been. Mart's got a pow'ful temper an' a mighty weakness f'r licker; but he's a nice-humoured feller, an' he fits hereabouts which Mister Conrad Heston don't.

"The trouble with my gal aint nothin' more nor less than eddication. She's got an overdose of it. They's a old sayin' that you cain't make no silk purses out o' no sows' ears. Thet's whut I was fooled into doin' an' Mother an' me has got a half a silk purse and a half a sow's ear. I don't know whether you ever seen my gal—"

"We passed her ridin' horseback this mornin'. She is a very pretty girl."

Devarney's heavy, leathern face flushed with parental pride. "She is thet; the purtiest gal as has sprung up in these parts in my time. Mother an' me has allers been moughty proud of her an' we've gave into her kinder too much f'r her own good.

"She's a pow'ful bright gal, Mister—"

"Carroll; David Carroll. This is James Sullivan."

"Mister Carroll; a pow'ful bright gal. She

I'arned ev'ything they was to be taught in the district school right off quick an' she kinder pestered us to send her to finish at the Bennet school down to Cha'leston. We got an aunt livin' thar on St. Philip Street. Well, we sent her down an' she win a medal or somethin' an' Mother an' me was so all-fired proud of her, wasn't we, Mother?"

The little woman's face beamed. "We shuah was."

"That when she 'lowed she wanted to go to the Memminger Normal we kinder let ourselves weaken. She stayed there five year—goin' through the whole six year course in thet time, Mr. Carroll; an' she win two medals. I'll show 'em to ye some time. But when she come back heah to live, we seen as we done the wrong thing.

"We ain't nothin' but plain folks, Mr. Carroll, an' we been livin' here in Santee swamp, come year go year fo' s'long's my gran' could 'member befo' he died. Six year' in Cha'leston had done its work on Essie. It warn't no ways fair to her, seein' as all that eddication made her kinder dissatisfied with Santee Swamp. Not that I'm blamin' her much . . . I'm takin' all

th' blame on myself. But ef she hadn't never went to Cha'leston to school she'd of been happy an' married Mart Farnam an' settled down like her Ma an' all the other gals hereabouts. Seems like I done her harmful by doin' for her.

"Well, she comes back here for good last year; purty as a paintin' and tryin' her best to be satisfied. But it warn't no use. Mart sort of got on her nerves, an' while I ain't a sayin' that she didn't love her Ma an' me, I sort of think we got on her nerves, too.

"Well, along come this Conrad Heston: pert an' chipper an' well dressed an' citified, an' him an' her hit it off fine from th' fust. I ain't a-blamin' of either of 'em. I reckon she had a good bit too much liberty to come an' go like she wanted, an' mebbe she was too much aroun' Furness Lodge when he was thar.

"But Heston come here to see her Ma an' me an' he seemed a nice sort of a chap an' I never thought of nothin' 'ceptin' that they was good friends . . . until right recent Mart Farnam come along an' suggested somethin' I'd have flattened any other man f'r sayin'. On'y Mart, that is; because Mart loved my gal; I reckon his love is a heap bigger'n he is.

"Mother an' me was up a tree 'bout her an' Heston. We didn't sort of know jes' whut to do. Mart 'lowed we'd better run Heston away, but he'd allers seemed right decent, an' I couldn't see no call to do nothin' like that. Me, I sorter like Heston; on'y of co'se I never thought of nothin' serious between him an' Essie.

"It sorter seemed she'd git her fill o' him an' then settle down an marry Mart. I said as much to Mart but he was mighty bitter ag'in' Heston . . . awful bitter.

"An' thet's about all, Mr. Carroll. I don't know why I been a-shootin' off my mouth this way to you, 'ceptin' on'y so's you'd understand conditions."

"Where were your daughter and Heston on the eighth and ninth of this month, Mr. Devarney?"

The big man scratched his head. "Essie went to Cha'leston fer some shoppin' on the eighth. Mornin'. She spent that night with her aunt. On the mornin' of the ninth Heston come here askin' fer Essie. We tol' him she was in Cha'leston an' would most likely be home that evenin'. He says please to tell her he had

come by for her an' wanted pow'ful bad to see her.

"She come up on the early afternoon train—'bout one o'clock at Karnak an' rode out on her horse which she had left there in Gilroy's stable. Ma give her Heston's message an' she went walkin' up toward Furness Lodge."

"What time was that?"

"'Bout five o'clock, I reckon."

"How far is it to the Lodge?"

"Three—fo'—miles."

"You didn't object?"

"Us?" Devarney smiled foolishly. "I sort of guess Ma an' me give up tryin' to run Essie long ago, Mr. Carroll."

"When was the next time you saw Heston? That is, after he came here on the eighth asking for your daughter?"

"We aint seen him sence that time."

"Not at all?"

"Nary time."

"What time did your daughter get back on the evening of the ninth?"

"Seven o'clock, I reckon. Just sort of dark; warn't it, Ma?"

"Jes' erbout, Pa; jes' erbout."

“And her trip to Charleston—”

A tattoo of hoofbeats came to them from the road, and the quartet looked up. Galloping toward them, sitting her saddle as though born there, chestnut hair flying about her pretty oval face, was Esther Devarney.

At sight of the group at the cabin door, she reined up sharply, and even at the distance Carroll could see the colour leave her face. Seth Devarney's voice broke in on him as from a distance:

“Reckon ye'd better try quizzin' my gal yourself, Mr. Carroll. She's a good gal, remember; an' whatever she says to ye, you can put down as the truth!”

CHAPTER XII

FOR a few seconds the girl sat her horse, staring with intransigent disapproval upon her parents and the strangers. Then she swung a rounded leg over the high-pommelled saddle and landed lightly on the ground. Carroll and Sullivan rose as she approached, to both came the same thought: that here indeed was a phenomenon of environment. That this girl should be the daughter of the crude simple folk to whom they had just been talking, seemed absurd.

As they gazed upon her they were doubly impressed with the domestic tragedy of the parents who had done too much for their daughter. Bound up, as she was, in Santee swamp—they had sown the seeds of discontent. Either she would remain with them, miserable and out of the picture, or else she would leave them for the vague terrors of the city world . . . and they would have their loneliness to nurse until the end of things.

The girl approached them with a swinging, free-hipped stride. Her magnificently formed head was thrown well back and clear hazel eyes regarded them hostilely from under long lashes. There was something irresistingly fetching in her frank flinging of the battle gauge. Carroll steeled himself for the play of wits which he knew was imminent. Her antagonism was apparent in every unconscious gesture.

It was her father who addressed her: "Essie, these gentlemen are—"

She stopped short, eyes on her father. Her voice, cool as spring water, fell musically upon Carroll's ears. "I know exactly who they are and what they want," she answered calmly. "I have nothing to say to them."

"Now, Essie. . . ."

"Please, Father. I know best about this."

Devarney opened his fingers with a helpless gesture. He turned a beseeching glance on Carroll. It was plain that he was apprehensive of his daughter's friendship with a man who was obviously suspected of complicity in the murder, and he felt that he had a friend in the boyish, frank detective from the vague North. Carroll took his cue quickly, thanking his lucky

stars that the girl's father looked upon him as an ally rather than an enemy.

"Miss Esther—"

She swept him with a deliberate stare. Only the flash of her eye and the high colour spots in her cheeks gave evidence to the internal seethe with which she was gripped. "I have nothing to say which could interest you."

Her language was well chosen; her enunciation clear as a bell. She, the daughter of Seth and his angular wife. . . .

"Indeed you have."

"I believe I am the best judge of that. And now, if you will excuse me—"

"I would advise you to listen to me, Miss Esther," said Carroll gently. "I assure you that I am speaking for your best interests."

"It requires more than your assurance," she answered coldly.

Carroll fired a broadside in a single question. "On what train does Conrad Heston plan to leave Karnak?"

The colour flew suddenly from her cheeks, leaving them white and accentuating the blaze of her deep-set eyes.

"Of course, knowing that we have visited his cabin, he will try to leave immediately—"

The girl's hand flew to her breast. "I know nothing whatever about Mr. Heston's movements."

"Nor where he was on the evening of the ninth of October?"

"No! Yes—yes, I know where he was that evening."

"Where?"

"In his cabin; the cabin he bought."

"Furness Lodge?"

"No. The other one—the one by the bend in the river."

"Why wasn't he in Furness Lodge? Why did he leave when the Forrests arrived? Didn't he buy the Lodge from its original owner? Did he know the Forrests?"

The volley of questions frightened the girl. She gazed helplessly at Carroll and then at her father. She was cornered and she knew it. Carroll hastened to press his advantage. The acid disappeared from his tones suddenly as it had entered, and he spoke quietly and soothingly. "I have your interests at heart, Miss

Esther. I assure you it will be better for your own sake to be frank with me. Tell me; at what time on the evening of the ninth were you with Conrad Heston?"

Silence—silence broken by her father's voice. "Be honest with Mr. Carroll, Essie."

"About half past six," came the halting answer as she groped her way across the verbal quicksand.

"Where?"

"At his cabin near the bend of the river."

"You are sure it was there and not at Furness Lodge?"

She nodded affirmatively. "Yes. . . ."

It was plain to Carroll that the girl was skirting the facts. He pursued his inquiry. "When you arrived at the cabin, was he there?"

"No— That is, Yes."

"Which?"

"Yes."

He stared at her. She stared back belligerently. "I said yes," she repeated almost hysterically.

"Do you mean it?"

"Of course. . . . Oh! I know what you're driving at; you're trying to connect Mr. Heston

with the murder. He had nothing to do with it. He wasn't there. I know it—"

"How do you know?"

"Because I was with him."

"Where?"

"At his cabin."

"What time did you reach there?"

"About six-thirty."

"Please, Miss Esther, let us be more frank. You left here at five o'clock in search of Heston. You admit that you did not meet him until six-thirty at his cabin. It was after seven when you returned home. Where were you between five and six-thirty?"

"Waiting for him," she answered desperately.

"Ah! Then he wasn't at the cabin when you got there?"

"He might have been near there."

"But you are not sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." There was a hunted, harassed look in her eyes. She was like the bird caught within the spell of a snake's deadly charm; struggling, beating madly to get away . . . yet drawing closer—closer. . . .

"If you're not sure, we'll presume that he was

walking toward that cabin from Furness Lodge.
. . .”

“He was at the cabin all the time!”

“But you have just said. . . .”

She stamped her foot with a sudden accession of temper. “I tell you I don’t know where he was, but I do know that he was not at Furness Lodge.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know it.”

“How?”

“I don’t care to explain.”

“I don’t like to see you assume this attitude, Miss Esther. You are implicating Heston when you have patently set out to shield him. I am being very honest with you: we have set out to learn where Heston was at the time of the murder. You say he was at his cabin and in the next breath admit that you were there and he was not. Then you maintain that you know he was not at Furness Lodge at that time and you refuse to explain how you know that. You make things look very black for Heston.”

“I don’t see why.”

“Haven’t you ever heard the old adage: ‘He who excuses, accuses’?”

"You mean that you believe that he was at Furness Lodge?"

"You are forcing us to believe it."

"Suppose I prove to you that he was not?"

She met Carroll's eyes steadily. There was truth in her direct gaze.

"Go ahead."

"I know that he was not there at that time . . . at that time . . . because—" Her voice broke and the words came very softly: "*Because I was!*"

Carroll was frankly startled. Jim Sullivan unconsciously bit hard on his cigar and spat out the stump. From Mrs. Devarney came a sort of choked cry, and her father swung on her—"Essie, girl—you don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, Father, I do. I am saying that a little after six o'clock I was at Furness Lodge."

"What were you doing there?" inquired Carroll, softly.

"Nothing."

"Why did you go?"

"To—to see Mr. Heston."

"What led you to think he was there?"

"He had been there the previous afternoon

while I ~~was in~~ Charleston and left word that he wanted to see me. That was on the eighth. When I got back, Father gave me his message and I went to Furness Lodge, where he had been living. He wasn't there."

"What time did you get there?"

"A little after six o'clock."

"What did you see there?"

"Nothing."

"No one?"

"No."

"Did you go inside?"

"Yes."

"No one was there?"

"No."

"Nobody by the icebox?"

"No. . . . No. . . . I tell you there was no one in the cabin!"

"Then what did you do?"

"Went to Mr. Heston's other cabin."

"By the road?"

"No. By the path along the riverbank."

"What led you to think that you would find him there?"

"He told me once that if he ever left Furness Lodge he would be at the other cabin."

"So—o. And when you got there—?"

"He was there."

"Did you discuss Mrs. Forrest's murder?"

She raised startled eyes to his. "We knew nothing of any murder—then."

"When was the first you knew of it?"

"An old negro whom I met on the road when I was returning home told me about it."

"And you were at Furness Lodge near sixty and there had been no murder committed?"

"Yes."

"You would have seen the body had it been there?"

"If it had been by the ice-box—yes."

"When did you leave Heston that evening?"

"About seven o'clock."

"Where?"

"About a half mile from here. He walked most of the way home with me. It was nearly dark."

"Are you sure it wasn't quite dark?"

"It was nearly dark. That's why he walked with me."

"And after that?"

"He went back to the cabin."

"Which cabin?"

"His—by the river bend."

"And you?"

"I came home. Everyone was talking about the—the—murder."

"And yet when you were there a little after six o'clock no murder had been committed?"

"I saw no signs of it. The first I knew of it was when the old negro told me."

"Who was this old negro?"

"I don't know his name."

"Where does he live?"

"Somewhere in the swamp. I don't know where. He was driving out from Karnak. Said some of the negroes living around the Lodge told him."

"Do many live around there?"

"A few—along the banks of the river. I guess they must have seen the excitement at the place."

"And you are quite sure that Heston was not with you when you were at the Lodge?"

"I've told you he was not—I've told you that. He wasn't with me; not then. Only later."

"What," inquired the detective casually, "what is Conrad Heston's real name?"

Her eyes widened. "Wh—what do you mean?"

"Don't you know that Conrad Heston is not his real name?"

"N-no. . . ."

Carroll suddenly produced the platinum and diamond ring. He held it before her eyes; the brilliant stone flashing in the afternoon sun.

"Do you know that ring?"

"I—I—" She moistened her lips. Terror was expressed in every fine feature of her face.

"N-no . . . I don't know it."

"Miss Esther, I can see by your face that you do recognize it. Is it yours?"

"No."

"Good! You've helped me considerably. Because I knew that it was either yours or Heston's: and since it isn't yours, it must be his."

"Wh—what—where did you find it?"

"In Furness Lodge, and it pretty well implicates Heston with the murder."

She leaped to her feet and stood regally before David Carroll. "It does not implicate him," she cried wildly. "It does not. . . ."

"But—"

"That ring is my ring! Mine. Conrad gave it to me; *he gave it to me and I lost it at the Lodge!*"

CHAPTER XIII

SILENCE fell upon the group. All eyes were fastened on the figure of the girl, bosom heaving with fierce emotion, eyes dilated with the light of desperation. But with her acknowledgement of ownership of the ring she quieted gradually, as though the confession was a load removed from her shapely shoulders.

"When did you lose it there, Miss Esther?"

"Several days ago."

"Before the ninth?"

"Yes. The sixth or seventh, I believe."

Seth Devarney, a quaint dignity in his manner, broke into the conversation. His booming voice was repressed, there was infinite sadness in his manner.

"Ye've been a-visitin' this man at the Lodge, Essie?"

"Yes, Father."

"That ain't no seemly way for a Devarney girl to act."

"It was all right, Father. I'm engaged to marry him."

"No, darter—ye ain't engaged to marry Conrad Heston. He hasn't spoke to me about it."

"He wanted 'to,'" she defended intensely. "He begged me to let him speak to you. But I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because he wasn't in a position to marry me now . . . and I knew you would never understand."

Devarney shook his head heavily. "No, I'm afraid I wouldn't understand that sort of a man. A man ain't got no right to be speakin' of love to a gal if he can't marry her. I'm right sorry ye've been so foolish, Essie—"

"There was nothing wrong, Daddy. . . ."

Tears sprang to his eyes at her use of the affectionate child-name. "No, darter; there was nothin' wrong. Y'r daddy knows that. But ye was pow'ful careless. I want ye to be honest with Mr. Carroll here. I think it will be best for ye."

"Thanks, Mr. Devarney," said the detective. "Tell me, Miss Esther, don't you know that Heston is not his real name?"

She shook her head. "I won't lie to you, Mr. Carroll—it's no use now. But I can't answer that question."

"That's tantamount to an admission. We'll let it drop. Where is Heston now?"

"I don't know."

"Aren't you equivocating, Miss Esther?"

"I—I—don't know *exactly* where he is."

"He's on his way to Karnak, isn't he?"

"I—I—can't say."

"You still insist that you were at Furness Lodge a little after six o'clock on the afternoon of the ninth?"

"Yes, I was there."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"What did you go there for?"

"To hunt for that ring."

"How did you to happen to lose it there?"

"My engagement to Heston was a secret, and so I wore the ring around my neck on a ribbon. I lost it several days before that and knew it must have been at the Lodge because I missed it shortly after leaving there."

"So." Carroll was speaking in a soothing voice. He was striving for the girl's confidence.

"You saw no one at the place?"

"No one."

"If Mrs. Forrest's body had been lying before the ice-box would you have seen it?"

"Yes. The screen door opens inward toward the ice-box and I could not have failed to see it."

"Was your arrival at the Lodge your first intimation that it was occupied?"

"Yes."

"You met no one on your way to the Lodge?"

"No. That is no one except Mart Farnam."

"Where was he?"

"Walking toward his cabin. He'd evidently been to Nixon's. He had been drinking."

"Does the road from Nixon's to his cabin pass the Lodge?"

"Yes."

"Did he say anything to you about strangers being there?"

"No. I've told you the first I knew of it was when I got there and saw signs of its occupation."

"Did Farnam speak to you at all?"

Her face flushed. "Yes."

Carroll eyed her keenly. "You're not very fond of him, are you, Miss Esther?"

"No! I loathe him. I—I—told him so."

"That afternoon?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He—he—" Her cheeks became scarlet.

"He spoke nastily about Mr. Heston and me, and said I—had disgraced myself."

"And you—?"

"I slapped his face and walked on. He was drunk."

"And you are quite convinced that he didn't know there was any one at the Lodge?"

"I am sure. He would have mentioned it if he'd known. Mart always tells what he knows."

"After you left the Lodge and walked down the river path toward Heston's own cabin; did you meet any one?"

"No."

"Did you see any one at Furness Lodge—even at a distance?"

"No."

"How long were you in the Lodge?"

"Only about three minutes. I entered the back veranda and walked through the dog-trot. By that time I was sure that something was wrong. I left through the front door and struck right through the trees to my right toward Mr. Heston's cabin."

"He was there when you got there?"

"Yes. He had just been fishing. He had a string of fish with him."

"He seemed quiet and calm?"

"Yes. Oh! I'm sure, Mr. Carroll, that he'd been nowhere near the Lodge."

"He knew that the folks were there, didn't he?"

"Yes,—he had known it since the previous day. He says their chauffeur came out with some supplies, and had trouble with his car about a mile from the Lodge. Mr. Heston then had time to remove his belongings from the Lodge to the cabin before the man arrived there, and he watched from then on."

"And the explanation Heston gave you about his sudden flight, he gave in confidence?"

The girl flashed him a grateful glance. "Yes, sir; in confidence."

Carroll rose. "I'm very much obliged, Miss

Esther. I'm sorry you found it necessary to mislead me for awhile at the beginning but I understand now. I hope things will turn out all right."

"You don't think he had anything to do with it, Mr. Carroll?" she questioned pleadingly. "You don't think that, do you?"

"I can't say that, Miss Esther," he answered gravely. "My very best friend—Stanford Forrest—has been arrested for that crime, and I am quite as convinced of his innocence as you are of the innocence of your fiancé. But the fact remains that some one did it . . . and it is my duty to find that some one."

"But he wasn't even there—"

"I hope for your sake that he was not. But if your story is strictly true some one visited that cabin between the time you left and little before seven. I don't understand things yet . . . and when you see Heston, or get in touch with him, you might beg him to do nothing foolish if he is really innocent. There is very little danger to an innocent man. . . ."

"But you don't understand—" she started, and then bit her lip abruptly.

He turned toward the girl's stricken parents.

"And you, Mr. and Mrs. Devarney, I wouldn't worry about this daughter of yours. I think I've gathered a good bit of truth and she's helped me a good deal. For the benefit of every one concerned, I'd suggest that you say nothing to any one about this conversation. I'm going to count on all of you as allies . . . and we'll see if we can't pull together and right this thing."

"Thanks," rumbled Devarney heavily. "I'd be pow'ful sorry for my gal if you could prove it on Heston, Mr. Carroll; but I b'lieve you're honest . . . an' ef he really done it, it's better she should know it now."

Gray dusk had fallen over the swamp when they left the cabin; the merging of October day with night . . . a pall-like blanket of coming darkness that threw the landscape into a gray monotone. The wastes waked to raucous night-life; the chorussing of frogs, the shrilling of myriad crickets. They found Carter sitting impassively in the big touring car, oblivious to the stares of the pickaninnies who prodded the big tires with grimy little black fingers. Carroll lightly tossed them a few pennies and laughed at their vociferous scrambling. One

bow-legged little tot wept mournfully when the scramble was over and he had gained no booty. Carroll pressed a bright new quarter into his hand and the little fellow streaked down the road toward his cabin as though fearful that the white-folks might reconsider.

Carroll ordered the car back to Furness Lodge, and as it rolled into the swamps from the settlement, its powerful headlights piercing the fast-gathering gloom, he settled himself against the deep upholstery.

Thought! He wanted time for thought! Time to connect up the various stories which had come to him in the past two days. The thing seemed to grow more complex the deeper he delved into it. But try as he might, he could not rid himself of the obsession of Heston's guilt. He mentioned as much to Sullivan, welcoming the combatting, revivifying influence of his assistant's agile brain.

"Heston?" answered Sullivan—"It does look like him—superficially."

"But you are thinking—"

"There's one fact that struck me as truthful in all her story," answered Sullivan. "Just one thing which I am willing to accept as cold,

stark fact—and it isn't very pleasant to consider."

"What is it?"

"Just this," came the quiet answer. "*Esther Devarney was at Furness Lodge just about the time the murder was committed!*"

Carroll was silent.

"She admits that," pursued Sullivan, "and the thing impressed itself upon me to the exclusion of almost everything else. I like the girl and I should hate to have a motive against her thrust before me. The conclusion would point inevitably to her."

"Heston may have been with her."

"He probably was. But that would convict both instead of acquitting her. Oh! I don't say she did it . . . but when you know that in all your investigation—especially if we insist on believing Forrest's story—when we know that there was one person on the scene at the time of the murder, we must not discard that person as a suspect."

"Quite right, Jim. But I can't believe it—"

"And I don't want to, David. But facts are facts. The girl lied to shield Heston. Might it not be that she was afraid you would be able to

prove she was there and so implicate him by his presence on the scene of the crime, and that to save that she admitted her own presence there?"

"It could be. But good Lord! Jim, did you ever see any one look less the murderess?"

"Yes!"

Carroll looked up in surprise. "You think she showed guilt?"

"Undoubtedly," returned Sullivan. "Not necessarily guilt of murder . . . but certainly guilty knowledge. Of course she knows the truth about Heston. . . ."

"Certainly. Which leads me to believe that Heston has played pretty straight with her."

"But has this ever occurred to you, David; you whose mind seems to have stagnated through your personal interest in Stanford Forrest . . . has it ever occurred to you that if, as we presume, Heston is a crook and if she knows all about him and still defends him and admits her love for him—that her attitude indicates a greater or less degree of moral turpitude?"

"Yes . . . I had thought of that, Jim."

"She loves the man. You can read it in every

word, every gesture. If she knew he had committed the murder, she would lie to shield him."

"Undoubtedly. But, Jim, doesn't it strike you that where she would be calm and self-possessed if she were shielding him, she would be likely to be unnerved were she the guilty person?"

Sullivan nodded. "A good point. But criminal psychology is so peculiar; the commission of a crime gives to the average person a cunning theretofore foreign to their nature. You've run across the phenomena a thousand times. Hello!" he broke off suddenly. "Here we are at the Lodge."

The car swung slowly up the magnificent approach to the Lodge which was illumined in the glare of the headlamps. They purred slowly toward the veranda . . . then Carter let the gears out, clapped on the emergency brake and the car stopped. The men alighted.

Once inside the Lodge they refreshed themselves and with Carter's assistance skirmished about for a meal. The table was set in short order. But scarcely had they settled themselves to gustatory enjoyment when the tele-

phone in the living room jangled insistently; two short rings, followed by two long ones.

He reached the telephone in a few strides and placed the receiver to his ear, where, true to custom, he heard the clicking of other instruments along the general line. "Hello!"

The deep, resonant voice of Sheriff Potter came to his ears. "Hello! That you, Carroll?"

"Yes."

"I've been trying to get you for the last hour. Remember the friend you asked me about?"

"Heston?"

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"He tried to get away from here on the seven o'clock train. I nabbed him and he's in jail awaiting your orders!"

CHAPTER XIV

SULLIVAN was eyeing Carroll peculiarly as the latter turned from the telephone. He spread his hands wide in a gesture of surrender. "Score one for you, David."

"That wasn't hard," smiled Carroll easily. "It was a foregone conclusion that he would try to get away. It doesn't necessarily connect him with the murder, although it does establish the fact that he isn't anxious to run foul of professional detectives. However, Potter will hold him until morning on a vagrancy charge and I'll give him the double-Ø then."

"And your other plans?"

"Not very well formulated. For one thing we shall go directly to his cabin in the morning and give it a thorough search."

They turned in early that night, their ears very readily becoming attuned to the anodyne hum of the swamps. Only once did Carroll wake and that was as a puffing, stern-wheel river steamer passed downstream, puffing and snort-

ing and splashing the red, muddy waters of the Santee.

Things were peaceful at Furness Lodge; very peaceful and very quiet. The first rays of the morning sun found the three men awake and bathing with gusto under the yard pump.

The air was cool and bracing with just sufficient tang to send the blood coursing turbulently through their veins. A breakfast of eggs, coffee and crackers followed by a few persimmons which the watchful Carter had found, satisfied them and they set out for Heston's cabin at the bend of the river.

They found it readily enough, padlocked as they had left it the previous afternoon. It was the work of only a moment to pry out the hasp with a tire-tool from the automobile, and Carroll and Sullivan stepped inside, the latter throwing back the solid board screens which, bolted from the inside, covered the four windows.

The cabin was excessively neat within. Chintz curtains covered the windows. On a rude centre table were a few well-selected books by authors known to the world of science; Freud, Ellis, Bloch . . . novels and plays by

Turgenev, Artzibashef, Ibsen, Gorky, Maupassant, Dreiser, Hardy. An iron cot was in the far corner and opposite it a large packing case converted into a kitchen cabinet. A kerosene stove nearby indicated the method used for cooking. There was little other furniture save a few crude chairs. But everything was neat and clean and a few half-dead flowers in a cheap glass vase indicated a woman's touch.

Carroll inspected the room closely. The books he lingered over for some time, inspecting the fly-leaves. A corner had been torn from each; it was evident that the owner had thus sought to conceal his identity. The written names had been torn out. But the books plainly indicated a man of culture and considerable depth.

The room betrayed nothing. And finally the two men paused before the well-made trunk in the corner. Without a word, Carroll broke the lock with his sharp-edged tire-tool. The lid flung back and the tray removed disclosed an array of tailored, expensive clothing; even to a full evening equipment.

Obviously the man who had assumed the name of Conrad Heston had not been wanting in the

goods of this world. Every garment bespoke affluence. Silk shirts, flannel suits for summer, heavy tweeds and serges; expensive, tailored underwear; silk pajamas; the clothes of a man of taste and discernment—and means.

Garment by garment Carroll removed the clothes from the trunk, piling them neatly that they might be returned without too great disarrangement. It was not until he reached the bottom of the trunk—after discovering that every tailor's tag had been carefully cut from the clothes—that he found anything worthwhile.

And that was a photograph; a photograph of a very pretty girl which gave evidence of having originally been in a frame from which it had been carefully removed. The photograph was under a blotter sheet in a small leather secretary; evidently put there months or perhaps years before—and forgotten; a case of out of sight, out of mind. But it was not the high forehead, the mass of brown hair, the perfect features of the pretty woman which attracted Carroll. Rather, it was the reverse side. For there, as he exultantly exhibited to Jim Sullivan, was an inscription in the clear, well-formed chirography of a woman:

"To George, with a heartfelt of love from—Katherine Carr!"

Sullivan whistled expressively. "Katherine Carr!" he ejaculated. "The initials K. C. on the ring you found!"

"Yes. And the George probably stands for the first of the man's initials: G. R. A. Quite evidently our Heston is named George and was once engaged to a Miss Katherine Carr of Newark, New Jersey."

Sullivan looked up in surprise. "What makes you say Newark?"

"The photographer's name," came the prompt answer as Carroll indicated the impression with his forefinger. "Rantoul—Newark, N. J. Obviously no person living within twenty-five or thirty miles of New York would patronize a Newark photographer unless that person was a resident of Newark and believed in fostering home industry."

Sullivan nodded. "Right again. You're becoming your normal self, David. What now?"

"First we'll get these things back in the trunk. Then we'll drive to Karnak. If Mr. Conrad Heston doesn't give us any information, I'll send you to Newark tonight to get an inter-

view with Miss Katherine Carr. You can find her somewhere; if not in the city of Newark, then in one of its suburbs; the Oranges, Montclair, Passaic . . . perhaps even Elizabeth."

Less than two hours later they bumped across the railroad tracks which mark the actual eastern boundary of Karnak, and braked to a stop before the red-brick Court House. Carroll found Sheriff Potter lolling back in a swivel chair in his office, frankly perusing the litigation merits of a Summons & Complaint which had been turned over to him for service. He was arguing the case pro and con with Peter Royce when Carroll entered, and, much to that masculine gossip's discomfiture, insisted on chasing him back to his own sanctum at the other end of the musty building. And then Sheriff Potter explained briefly and clearly his arrest of Conrad Heston.

"Northbound train came in, and just as it did, he came from Gilroy's store across yonder and tried to get on from the other side. He had a suitcase with him and I nabbed him. I had been looking for just such a move, provided your suspicions were not entirely incorrect. He was

nervous, but attempted an attitude of shocked surprise. Didn't make any very strenuous objections to being held; just wanted to know the charge, and as I didn't want to expose your hand by chalking murder up against him . . . I made it vagrancy. Being a city man, he didn't realize that I have no right to hold him on the charge . . . and I've got him safe and sound.'

"That's great, Potter," enthused Carroll heartily. "And now, may I chat with him?"

Potter waved his hand easily. "Go to it, Son. And tiptoe past old Royce's door while you're on your way. I don't want that old peat back here. I need a nap."

Carroll stopped by Stanford Forrest's cell just long enough to report progress without going into details. He found his friend haggard and showing the effects of a cruel gnawing grief. Then he made his way to the cell occupied by Conrad Heston. Orrin Kinney, the jailer, let the two detectives into the cell, and then reluctantly made his way down the corridor and out of earshot.

Carroll was not surprised at Heston's physical appearance. His foreknowledge of the man had prepared him for just about what he

shocked saw; a man of about thirty years of age, well
ous ob-groomed, clean-shaven, medium height; with
know light hair and level blue eyes. An air of
e your gentility radiated from the prisoner; something
m . . akin to dignity permeated his manner. His face
didn't was not that of the criminal in any way; his
on the expression merely one of hurt and fear. . . . It
und. was he who spoke first.

Carroll "Well?"

if "You know who we are?" asked Carroll.

to i "Yes," bitterly; "friends of Stanford For-
whi rest determined to free him of a charge of which
d pr he is undoubtedly guilty." His tone was low,
his enunciation clear, his bearing reserved.

s "Not quite, Mr. Heston. We merely want to
the find the guilty man."

h "It is, of course, needless for me to assure
re you that I am not he."

"You deny guilt?"

"Certainly. But you expected that."

"Yes—I expected a plea of innocence." Carroll admired the man's self-possession. "We merely wished to question you—"

"I have nothing to say."

"It is for your own interest if you are innocent—"

"I prefer to be the judge of that, Mr. Carroll."

The detective shrugged. He made his next question as casual as possible, but his narrow-lidded eyes were watching every play of facial expression.

"When did you last see Miss Katherine Carr?"

Heston's face twitched. He controlled himself with a visible effort. "I do not know of whom you are speaking," he answered in a low voice.

"You are sure?"

"Yes."

The man was lying and both Carroll and Sullivan knew it. To the latter's surprise, Carroll did not press his point.

"Why have you assumed an alias, Mr. Heston?"

"My name is Conrad Heston."

"Haven't you dropped a 'George' from your name?"

Again that light of startled fear leaped into the eyes of the cornered man. "My name is Conrad Heston."

Carroll shrugged, and again took another

tack: "So much for that then, if you insist. When did you leave Newark—and why?"

"I have never been in Newark."

"Don't you realize," said Carroll with sudden earnestness, "that these lies are involving you deeper and deeper? Can't you see from my questions that I *know* you are not truthful with me?"

"I will take my chances," came the dogged response. In spite of himself, Carroll admired the other's poise.

"Where is your deed to Furness Lodge?"

"You know as well as I do that I never bought it—that I had no right there."

"You knew Furness pretty well, though, didn't you?"

"No." Again the telltale expression that denoted the lie."

"How long did you know Mary Carmody—Mrs. Forrest?"

"I never set eyes on her in my life."

"You knew Stanford Forrest, though; didn't you?"

"I knew *of* him. You can prove by the Sheriff that I didn't know him personally. He stopped me at Forrest's cell when he arrested

me, and Forrest admitted he had never seen me before."

"Mrs. Forrest cannot clear you in that way—unfortunately."

"Unfortunately," came the echo from the prisoner.

"At least you will not deny knowing Miss Esther Devarney, will you?"

A long pause: "I guess there'd be no use in denying that."

"And that you are engaged to her."

"I deny that."

"Even after her admission?"

"Listen here, Carroll; I'm not a weakling nor a mental imbecile. I'll not be tricked by third degree methods—"

"Have it your way. I cannot force you to answer my questions. But maybe you might care to tell me where you and she were at six o'clock on the afternoon of the ninth?"

"I was not with her."

"At six-thirty or thereabouts?"

"I don't care to say."

"Well I know that about that time she was with you at your cabin near the bend of the Santee. I also know that shortly before that

time, and just about the hour of dusk when the murder was committed, Esther Devarney was at Furness Lodge."

For one instant Heston stood rigid with horror. Then he leaped across the cell and sank powerful fingers deeply into Carroll's shoulders: "Good God, man, you're not thinking that she killed Mrs. Forrest? You're not suspecting her of that?"

"I take my cue from you, Heston. That is one question *I* will not answer. But she admits that she was there."

He shook his head. "I don't believe it. . . . I don't believe she told you any such thing."

"Believe what you like. Thus far I have established the fact that she was there just about the time the murder was committed. Are you quite sure you were not with her?"

"I—I—don't rack me, Carroll. I'm not going to tell you anything; not a thing."

"Not even why you tried to make a getaway."

"No."

"Nor your real name?"

"It is Conrad Heston."

Carroll rose. "I'm afraid we can't get together, Heston; and I'm sure you're only injur-

ing yourself. Oh! by the way—" he turned suddenly and extended his hand, palm uppermost, toward Heston. In his palm glittered the diamond ring he had found at the Lodge. "When did you lose this?"

Heston swallowed with difficulty. His answer came in a voice harsh and dry:

"I—I—never lost it. I have never—seen it—before."

Carroll pocketed the ring calmly. "Very good. However your denial doesn't bother me:—you see Miss Devarney says that you gave her that as an engagement ring and that she lost it at Furness Lodge!"

He turned and beckoned Orrin Kinney. And as they started down the corridor he caught a fleeting glimpse of Heston; Heston staring rigidly after him with an expression of fixed terror on his rather handsome face!

That night Jim Sullivan left on the Limited for Newark.

CHAPTER XV

THE following morning David Carroll closeted himself with Sheriff Potter with whom he had a long and serious talk, as the result of which the northbound train leaving Karnak at ten o'clock found Carroll aboard, bound for Columbia; Heston in the personal custody of the gray-eyed Sheriff.

Since the realization that Bennet Hemingway, erstwhile rival with Stanford Forrest for the hand of Mary Carmody, had been in Columbia on the day preceding the murder, Carroll had been unable to rid himself of the idea that Hemingway was connected in some way with the crime, and he was now taking advantage of Sullivan's absence on another trail to discover Hemingway's whereabouts on the day when Mary had been killed.

He arrived at Columbia at one o'clock and chartered a rickety taxicab for a round of the hotels. He went first to the city's leading hostelry on the other end of Main Street near

the postoffice and there his quest ended so far as Columbia's hotels were concerned, for on the register, in handwriting unmistakably Hemingway's, he found the signature.

The day clerk remembered Hemingway distinctly; a slender man, too well dressed, and travelling for a machinery concern in which he boasted an interest. From the clerk Carroll secured a list of the machinery companies in the city which Hemingway would have been most likely to visit, and he made the rounds.

The trail was exceedingly easy to follow. At the office of the Columbia Cotton Gin & Machinery Company he found the general manager who remembered giving a good-sized order to Hemingway about four o'clock on the afternoon of the eighth, and he also remembered Hemingway stating that he would leave for Florence the following morning.

Carroll returned to the hotel, every movement of his man on the eighth accounted for, and consulted the records. He learned that Hemingway had checked out at 3:30 on the morning of the ninth on the Florence train. Carroll left Columbia shortly before three o'clock and arrived in Florence at five in the afternoon. He

found Hemingway's autograph on the register of the Florence hotel under date of the ninth and the records showed that he had arrived before breakfast that morning.

The clerk did not recall Hemingway but shamefacedly confessed that he had a poor memory for faces. He referred Carroll to several companies dealing in cotton gin equipment and at the second of these Carroll located his man. The firm, it seemed, had placed an order with Hemingway's firm some time before and it had been delayed in transshipment at Charleston. Hemingway, said this man, had promised to leave for Charleston on the one o'clock afternoon train.

Carroll then sought the dispatcher who assured him that insofar as he could remember the train in question—one of the New York-Florida flyers—had not stopped at Karnak on its southbound run. Much puzzled and almost convinced that his suspicions against Hemingway had been fathered by desire, Carroll dined in Florence and left that bustling little metropolis on the 8:40 train.

He arrived in Charleston at eleven o'clock and was driven to the austere Charleston Hotel

on Meeting Street. The records destroyed his last hope—they and a talk with the chief clerk.

Bennet Hemingway had registered at the Charleston Hotel at about four o'clock in the afternoon. Investigation disclosed the fact that if that were the case, he could not have caught the local to Karnak in time to have been there at 6:30, at which hour Mary Forrest had been killed.

But to make sure, Carroll made the round of the freight offices. One of the railroad clerks remembered Hemingway who, it seemed, had been rather officious and unpleasant in his demands regarding the transshipment of the ginning machinery for the Florence firm. He tapped a pencil thoughtfully against his forehead—

“Ye-e-s, I believe I do. He got here about four-thirty, and I went with him to the freight shed. He was with me until about five-thirty.”

“You are quite sure?”

“Positive—I remember distinctly that it caused me to break a date with my girl.”

Carroll returned to the hotel and ate a belated supper. He engaged a room, took a cold bath and seated himself on the bed. Results had

been of a nature contrary to his desires. His investigation had proved only one thing; a perfect alibi for Bennet Hemingway!

Carroll was genuinely sorry. In the first place, the personal element, which had figured so largely in his conduct of the investigation, had led him to hope for Hemingway's guilt. Hemingway was the only person even remotely connected with the case in whose arrest and conviction Carroll would have taken real pleasure. But he was too honest with himself, and had been too meticulous in his investigation, to longer harbour the idea that Hemingway might have killed the bride.

The several days of mental strain and emotional stress were telling on Carroll. His face had lost much of the ingenuously boyish look which so attracted people. Tiny crow's-feet had appeared about the corners of the eyes and he seemed tired, and, for the moment, dispirited. <

Sleep did not come easily that night. But when it did come, it was deep and dreamless. At five o'clock he was waked by the jangling of his bedside telephone and at 5:40 was munching a stack of flacid wheatcakes and sipping a cup

of scalding brown water which masqueraded under the name of coffee at a restaurant opposite Charleston's Union Station. At six o'clock his train pulled out, en route for Karnak, and he settled back in his seat in the chair car and gazed out upon the monotonous scenery.

He reached the Court House before the arrival of the sheriff and spent a half hour in the cell with Stanford Forrest. It was a gloomy half-hour. Carroll had discovered nothing definite save that the man for whose guilt he had hoped was innocent of the crime itself, no matter how much trouble he had caused by the letter which so damningly incriminated the stricken husband.

The first wracking pain of his sudden bereavement had left Forrest. He was none the less a mourner, but a quiet dignity had come to sit upon his shoulders; a dignity accompanied by an extra dozen years of age which the tragedy had placed upon him.

At the outset he had not cared whether they hanged him or whether they didn't. He was more sane now, more nearly normal. In his breast there had sprung a desire for revenge; a desire to see some one brought to justice for

the crime. So much, at least, he told Carroll, realizing that in his friend he had an ally whose confidence in his innocence could not be shaken by circumstances.

Eventually Carroll left his friend and stopped for a few moments by the cell door behind which Conrad Heston sat disconsolately on his iron cot. He greeted Carroll dully.

"Haven't decided to say anything?" asked the detective.

Heston shook his head. "I have nothing to say. Except," hopefully, "I'd like mighty well to see Esther Devarney."

"That's a matter for Sheriff Potter," was Carroll's answer: "I'll see him about it."

And he did. "It don't sound to me like a good idea," volunteered Potter.

"It isn't," came Carroll's prompt answer, "from my standpoint. However, if you wish to—"

"When do you expect your friend Sullivan back from the north?"

"Tomorrow or the next day."

"Wouldn't you prefer that I keep Heston and the girl apart until you hear what he has to report?"

"I'd appreciate it, Sheriff. Of course, you mustn't forget that I am acting for a particular man in this case. . . ."

Potter smiled genially. "I understand, my boy. But I think you'd come pretty close to being honest with me."

"I haven't pledged myself."

"I don't ask you to. In the first place, I'm convinced that your friend, Forrest, is innocent."

"In spite of that letter?"

"Yes—in spite of the letter."

"What makes you think that?"


"Hunch," smiled the sheriff, easily. "I play 'em strong, son; when they hit me hard enough. This one did."

"I'm glad of that," returned Carroll, gratefully. "I was afraid that as he is my friend I might have allowed my judgment to become warped. There's no overlooking the fact that some one murdered Mrs. Forrest, and that some one was not Bennet Hemingway."

"Not Hemingway? You are sure?"

"Positive," and Carroll detailed his investigation of the previous day.

"Good, fast work," applauded the sheriff



when he finished. "Frankly, I'm about as sorry over results as you are. I'd like to see that skunk hanged higher than Haman. Have you any idea who did do it? Have you got the goods against Heston?"

Carroll shook his head. "Frankly—no. Circumstantial evidence—yes. He's a crook, but I'm not at all sure that he killed Mary—Mrs. Forrest. He was there, or he could have been, and his refusal to say anything is suspicious. But I tell you frankly that the only person I know was at Furness Lodge at the time of the crime, was Esther Devarney!"

Sheriff Potter passed his hands across his eyes. "That's unthinkable, Carroll."

"Just about. And yet, she admits it. And to my mind her admission means one of two things; it is either self-incriminating or else it is a deliberate attempt to shield Heston."

"You mean that she cares enough for him to know that he committed the murder (provided he did, of course) and throw suspicion on herself in order to free him?"

"Yes. I've seen that sort of thing before a number of times. There is such a delicate line of demarcation between whole and half truths

that I'm leaving no stone unturned to find out every detail as regards the movements of every person in the case on the afternoon of the ninth."

"But you have a pretty well-formed opinion?" persisted Potter.

"Perhaps."

"Pointing to who?"

Carroll shook his head. "I'd rather not say at this stage of the game, Sheriff. I might be all wrong . . . and if I am I'd hate to get your mind started on the wrong track. You're of a heap more help to me as an independent thinker."

The sheriff shrugged. "Have it your own way, son. It sounds wise, but I'll be honest and admit that it's plumb tantalizing. What are your plans for today?"

"I'm going to get Carter to drive me out in the car. I'll either get back to town tonight or remain at the Lodge. If you need me, and I haven't shown up, you can telephone me there. Meanwhile, as I understand it, you'll let no one see Heston?"

"No one—unless he engages a lawyer. I haven't any right to keep his lawyer away."

"Good!" Carroll rose. "It isn't an easy case, Sheriff—but I have hopes that we're not so very far away from a solution."

The other shook his head. "If you were to put it up to me, I'd say we were a heap farther away than when we started!"

The drive to Furness Lodge was tedious and uneventful. The sun had passed its zenith when they arrived and Carroll and Carter made a light lunch on the front veranda. Everything there was quiet and peaceful. After the meal Carroll made a resurvey of the premises. Everything was as he and Sullivan had left it two days before; the blood, the smashed olive oil bottle, the blood-stained ice pick . . . the faint footprints on the two back steps and for a few rods leading toward the shrubbery.

He left Carter in the Lodge and walked down the path toward Heston's cabin, deliberately avoiding the main highway. He wanted to time himself on the walk from the Lodge to the cabin to test that element of Esther Devarney's story.

The path itself was beautiful; skirting the higher ground along the south bank of the placid Santee; dipping here through a copse of fern and moss . . . rising there to a narrow avenue

through a wall of timber and passing under a canopy of green leaves and drooping gray moss.

Carroll walked slowly; hands clasped behind his back, brow furrowed meditatively. The events, as he knew them, unfolded themselves.

The stillness of early afternoon was pierced by the *spra-a-aug* of a rifle. Almost at the same instant there was a vicious crack in the trunk of the tree Carroll was passing! A quick glance showed the hole left by the bullet—it had missed him by scarcely an inch.

He acted like lightning. In a bound he was behind the tree, crouching—muscles tensed. Some one firing at him. . . .

Another shot cracked through the stillness! Another bullet *flmp'd* into the tree trunk!

Carroll peered cautiously from his shelter. About fifty yards away he saw a figure in the undergrowth. Slowly he drew his automatic from its holster under his left armpit. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

AND then, as the figure of the almost-assassin detached itself from the concealing background of undergrowth and stepped frankly into the open—Carroll laughed.

For the figure was that of a boy, a low-headed, freckled youngster sans shoes and stockings and carrying a .22-calibre pump rifle in the crook of his left arm in approved Daniel Boone fashion. He regarded Carroll part with astonishment and part with restraint.

"By gosh!" he exploded suddenly; "I almost got him."

"Did you?" inquired the detective, politely.

"Yeh. . . . And," accusingly, "I would of, too, ef you hadn't of frightened him off."

"And because I frightened *him*—whoever he may be—you tried to pot me instead?"

"Who tried to shoot you?"

"You did?"

"Didn't nuther."

"I assure you, Mister Daniel Boone, that you

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canopy of green leaves
Carroll walked slowly
brow furrowed

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by the spru-a-aug of
instant there was a
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" . . . an adjustable affair which
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A . . . you're a regular feller—just
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you, son. And now, since we're
I'm all here, might I ask your

Porter Devarney. What's yourn?"
Devarney! Carroll glanced sharply
boy . . . but then he remembered what
had told him; that Devarneys abounded
Santee Swamp. It surely couldn't be
and yet the boy's friendship with

...
e's David—David Carroll."

lad's eyes popped wide. "No? Say,
n't th' real deteckative I hearn Marm an'
t'in' about, are you?"

ppose I am."

came within an inch of succeeding whether you meant to or not."

"Wasn't shootin' at you," insisted the boy, stubbornly. "Never even seen you."

"What were you shooting at?"

"Flyin' squirrel."

"And where was this squirrel?"

"In thet thar tree." The boy indicated the lower branches of a nearby oak. Carroll with difficulty repressed a smile.

"I'd advise you to get another rifle, my boy. To express it mildly, your bullets went wild. They hit in this tree trunk within an inch of my head. I was in a good deal more danger than your flying squirrel; not that I'm saying a word against your marksmanship. It is undoubtedly the fault of the rifle—"

"'Tain't nuther. Mr. Heston gimme this rifle an' it come from N'Yawk."

Carroll hoped that the keen-eyed lad did not notice the start of surprise he had caused by the casual mention of the name of the man who interested Carroll more at that particular moment than any other individual. He gravely took the rifle from the boy and inspected it.

"A fine weapon," he commended gravely.

"Your Mr. Heston has a good eye for rifles. Here's the trouble," and he deftly realigned the rear sight . . . an adjustable affair which had been jarred from position. The boy flushed slightly and then looked gratefully at Carroll.

"Say, Mister, you're a regular feller—just like Mr. Heston," he hastened to add loyally, as though by the comparison he was conferring upon his new-found friend the ultimate compliment.

"Thank you, son. And now, since we're friends, and I'm all here, might I ask your name?"

"Sure. Porter Devarney. What's yours?"

Porter Devarney! Carroll glanced sharply at the boy . . . but then he remembered what Farnam had told him; that Devarneys abounded through Santee Swamp. It surely couldn't be . . . and yet the boy's friendship with Heston. . . .

"Mine's David—David Carroll."

The lad's eyes popped wide. "No? Say, you ain't th' real deteckative I hearn Marm an' Pops talkin' about, are you?"

"I suppose I am."

"Oh! golly! Sa-a-ay. . . . Ain't it bully meetin' you?"

"Your name," said Carroll, tentatively; "it's a very pretty name."

"Huh! They was so many fust names used on us Devarneys that they sorter run out, so when I come along they named me Porter, after the Porter Military Academy in Charleston where Pops says I'm goin' to go next year."

"Is Seth Devarney your father?"

"Yep."

"Fine fellow. How are all your folks?"

"They ain't none but me an' Marm an' Pops an' Sis, an' we're all well, 'ceptin Sis, an' she ain't eatin' nothin' in the last couple of days."

"I'm sorry to hear that. What seems to be troubling her?"

"Most everything, I guess, though she says it ain't nothin' but headache. Marm says she's takin' on over Mister Heston gettin' arrested—Say!" he broke off suddenly and rose to his feet, glaring belligerently at Carroll. "You ain't the feller that arrested Mr. Heston, are you?"

Carroll skirted the truth for diplomatic reasons. "No—Sheriff Potter did that."

The lad subsided. "That's good, because you an' me couldn't be friends if you had arrested him."

"You don't think he's guilty?"

"Huh! He wouldn't unhook a fish he's that soft hearted. Say, he's a friend of mine, an' I know he didn't do it. Besides, wasn't I with him that afternoon?"

For the second time the lad had thrown a distinct shock into the detective. A boy of whose existence he had not known until a few minutes previous had here casually made the most vital statement regarding the case which had yet come to his ears.

"You were with Heston, when?"

"The afternoon that lady got killed over to th' Lodge."

"What were you doing?"

"Fishin'."

"What time?"

"Oh!" The boy ostentatiously produced a dollar watch and glanced reflectively at the dial. "Seems like I reckon 'twas up to about half-past five I was with him—or tharabouts?"

Half-past five! If that were true, Heston could just about have walked to Furness Lodge,

killed Mary and returned in time to meet Esther Devarney at his cabin, provided that her story was to be believed in its entirety.

"Half-past five, eh?" echoed Carroll, casually. "And where did he go when you left?"

"Down to the landin'."

"For what?"

"Said he was goin' out on the river in his bateau boat."

"He has a boat?"

"Yes—just a rotten li'l ol' bateau that rows like a scow. Ain't no good for nothin' but fishin' with, it's that slow."

"Did you see him start out on the river?"

"No, he sent me off."

"Where'd he send you?"

"To see Sis an' tell her he wanted to see her."

"Where?"

"At his place; where y' s'pose?"

Carroll laughed. "I'm right silly; there, of course. Did you find her?"

"Sure. She was walkin' up the road t'ward his place."

"What did you tell her?"

"I just said he wanted to see her."

"You didn't say where?"

"Why, no. I reckoned she knowed he wasn't at the Lodge no more."

"Then you didn't tell her that he wasn't there?"

"No. I reckoned she knowed that."

Carroll's mind was working rapidly. If the boy's story was true the chances that Heston was at the Lodge at the time of the murder were reduced to a minimum, but he was establishing the truth of his sister's story and substantiating her statement that she was at Furness Lodge and alone at the time the murder was committed.

"What did you do after you left her, Porter?"

"Sort of went into the woods. I wanted to see could I kill some sparrows with my rifle."

"You didn't see anybody else before you got home?"

"Nobuddy but Sandy Hawkins in his ox-cart an' Mart Farnam."

"Where were they going?"

"Sandy was goin' home, I guess; an' Mart was headed t'wards the Karnak d'rection."

Most likely he was a'goin' f'r some lick^{er}. He's a pow'ful heavy drinker, is Mart."

"Do you like him?"

"Mart?" The boy shrugged. "I guess he's all right. I like him better'n Sis does, but that ain't sayin' so much."

"You prefer Heston, eh?"

The youthful eyes glistened. "Say, Mister Carroll, that's a fine man f'r you. Gee! I hope Sis marries him. So does she," he added naïvely.

"And after you passed Farnam and Hawkins," pursued Carroll, "did you see any one else?"

"Not 'tel I got to the village, an' then I seen all the folks. Say, what you askin' me all these questions for?"

"Just interest. They've got my best friend accused of this crime, Porter, and I'm doing what I can to free him."

"You got a pow'ful hard job," said the boy honestly. "Ev'ybody says he done it."

"I think everybody is wrong."

Porter sighed. "Well, I guess you ought to know, seein' as you're a regalar deteckative. But if he didn't do it, *who* done it?"

"That's a poser, son. I'm not sure yet."

Again the flash of antagonism in the boy's eyes. "You ain't tryin' to prove nothin' on Mr. Heston, are you?"

"Nothing against him, son. I'm just trying to find out who really did it. Say . . . how'd you like to walk over to the Lodge with me and ride home in my automobile?"

"Golly! Would I . . ."

They were fast friends by the time they reached the Lodge and the boy luxuriated in the deep-cushioned upholstery during the short drive to the village. He took Carroll proudly in tow, and, rifle over his shoulder, led the way to his crude home.

Through the window of the westernmost room Carroll could see the thin, angular figure of Mrs. Devarney bending patiently over the battered and recalcitrant kitchen range. A wisp of smoke issued from the mud-caked chimney. Seth Devarney, huge of frame, sat hunched on his doorstep, dry-smoking a corncob pipe. He rose as his son and the detective approached, nodded his greeting and delved into the subject nearest his heart without circumlocution.

"Glad to see ye, Mr. Carroll. My darter,

Essie, has only jes' come back from Karnak an' she's pow'ful mad they wouldn't let her see Heston. She sorter lays it to you, too."

The girl appeared in the doorway as he finished speaking. Her eyes were red—it was plain that she had been weeping; but her manner was militant. There was no sign of weakening before the detective and she carried the battle to him with a positiveness of speech he admired in spite of himself.

"By what right have you forbidden company to Mr. Heston?" she asked.

He bowed slightly. "I haven't done that, Miss Esther. I have no such power."

"Let's don't quibble!" she flashed. "I realize that Sheriff Potter is the man who gave the order; but it was you who manufactured it."

"You are sure?"

"Certainly. Things are not done that way in Karnak County, and never have been. A man accused of every crime on the calendar has heretofore been allowed to hold receptions if he cared to. Besides, the thing is illegal and you know it."

"I don't think it's illegal, Miss Esther. He has the privilege of seeing a lawyer if he cares

to. Aside from that I believe the matter is one within the discretionary powers of the sheriff."

"You will certainly admit that it is unjust, won't you?"

"Yes."

"You will admit that you fostered the idea because you are bending every effort to clear Mr. Forrest no matter what suffering and injustice are caused elsewhere?"

"Not quite so bad as that."

"You may not think so, Mr. Carroll; I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and admit that you do not—but that is precisely what you are doing. Mind you, I don't say that Mr. Forrest is guilty; but I do assert that Mr. Heston is not."

"You are sure?"

"Positive. He was at the cabin when I reached there and I went direct from the Lodge. The murder was committed after I left and he couldn't have done that and beaten me to the cabin."

"There is only one way he could have done it," said Carroll, ruminatively. "He might have come to the Lodge in his boat and returned the same way."

The girl laughed shortly. "Some one has been misleading you. He could walk backwards quicker than that boat can travel. It's a leaky, barnacled scow."

"Well . . ." Carroll shrugged, "*somebody* committed the crime."

"It was not Mr. Heston."

"And *I* am equally as convinced that it was not Stanford Forrest."

"Well?"

"There was no one else there—"

"—Except their chauffeur," she flashed. His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Except Carter," he murmured, half to himself. "Yes, you're right, Miss Esther—Carter could have done it. That is, it was physically possible."

"But of course you won't try to fasten the guilt on this man Carter because he was employed by your friend. . . ."

"Please, Miss Esther,—let's don't paint me in such black colour. I'm not that bad—really, I'm not."

"You wouldn't let me see him. Mr. Heston, I mean."

"He can see his lawyer—or some member of his family."

She looked at him peculiarly: "Some member of his family?"

"Certainly."

"Would you classify a—a—fiancée as—family."

She stood before the detective, regal in her pride and faith.

"You mean—?"

"That I have pledged myself to marry Conrad Heston, and if he will have me I will marry him tomorrow."

Seth Devarney put out a restraining hand. There was a catch in his voice: "Darter—Essie, gal; be keerful. It's pow'ful easy to git married, ye know; an' ye've got a long time to be sorry for it arterwards."

"I know, Father. I understand that. But you wouldn't have your own daughter desert the man she loves because he happened to be unjustly under arrest; you wouldn't have me do that, would you?"

" 'Tain't fair to frame the question thataway, Essie; 'tain't fair—thet's what. Bein' it's you I don't wanter tell the truth—"

She touched his shoulder lightly and turned triumphantly to Carroll. "You see the stuff we're made of, Mr. Carroll!"

He inclined his head. "You win, Miss Esther. I shall see to it that from tomorrow morning on you are allowed to see Heston. Let me compliment you on your loyalty . . . and advise you disinterestedly that you wait for the marriage until you are quite sure that there is nothing—this affair—or something in his past life, to crop up between you."

"I'm not afraid," she answered proudly. "As for this affair, I know he is innocent. You see, I was at the Lodge and I *know*!"

And that night, as Carroll smoked numberless cigarettes on the veranda of Furness Lodge, just one idea remained in his brain; one spectral certainty of which he could not rid himself.

Esther Devarney had been at the Lodge immediately before the murder! Her admission cleared Carter automatically. And thus far Esther Devarney was the only person known to have been on the scene at about that hour!

Esther Devarney had been there . . . yes; Esther—and Stanford Forrest. . . .

Carroll spent a sleepless night.

CHAPTER XVII

EARLY the following morning Carroll was driven into Karnak. He found a telegram awaiting him in Potter's office. It was from Jim Sullivan, was brief and decidedly to the point:

Meet eleven o'clock train Karnak.
Coming chockful of good dope.

Carroll extended the telegram silently to the sheriff.

"Looks good, eh?"

"You think he's got it?"

"When Sullivan turns to slang he's got something to tell that's worth while. Wonder if that train's on time?"

"It's one of the 80's. They're never very late."

Carroll walked to the window and stared up the single street of the desolate little town. His face showed the effects of his sleepless night, and he turned suddenly. "Sheriff, if some one

was to suggest to you that Esther Devarney killed Mrs. Forrest, would you believe it?"

"Eh?" Potter rose agitatedly. "Good Lord—No! Would you?"

"No," came the quiet answer, "I don't believe I would. But I'll tell you this much, Potter; if she got before a jury with her own admissions they'd have a hard time acquitting her."

Potter smiled slightly. "You don't know a South Carolina jury, son. They'd never convict a pretty woman."

"I guess that isn't peculiar to South Carolina, Sheriff."

At ten minutes after eleven o'clock a shrill whistle cut through the still October air. The sheriff straightened. "That's your train, son. She's blowing for the Santee trestle now. Better trot over to the depot if you want to make sure of getting him while he's hot."

The heavy train of solid Pullmans slowed up briefly at the ramshackle depot and Jim Sullivan swung down from the end one. At sight of his superior he broke into a broad grin: a smile of frank boyish pride at his achievement. Carroll pumped his hand and steered him to the

sheriff's office, where, at his suggestion, the two doors, one leading to the office of the probate judge, and the other to the main musty corridor, were closed.

"I reckon we can let the sheriff in our little secrets, Jim. He's been so all-fired decent to us—"

"I'd rather have him know it," smiled Sullivan. "What I know will do nothing but help Forrest."

"And Heston?"

"It explains. You can judge for yourself whether it helps or hurts."

"Well—begin—at the beginning. You found Miss Katherine Carr."

"I did. And she's a pippin; a lulu-bird, right. But as you said—start at the beginning. . . .

"I swung off the train at the dinky little station on Market Street, Newark, which passes for a depot. Moseyed downstairs and hopped on one of those big yellow Public Service Corporation street cars and got off at Broad and Market. Hunted for a good hotel and finally put up at a dump on Broad Street down near the Jersey Central depot.

“Looked in the 'phone book and located my photographer pronto. Had a nice little studio down near that park where the Hudson Tunnels depot is. Funny little round-faced fellow that looked as though he was born fat and then his father sat on his head. Rounded—puffed out.

“Did he know Miss Katherine Carr? He did. Was she living in Newark? She was. Where? Mt. Prospect Avenue. How to reach her home? A million directions that got me so confused that I went downstairs and chartered a sea-going taxi.

“Got to the house in about a half hour and the minute I lamped it I knew our friend—Heston, had been in soft once if a dame living there had gushed love-gushes to him on the back of a photograph. Looked like ready-money and three first mortgages. Footman in liver-an'-onions opened the door. Slipped him a card and he slipped me in the house. Soft, squishy rugs; deep chairs—and Miss Carr.

“Boy, take it from me, I didn't blame Venus for dying and staying dead when I lamped that dame. Excuse my slang, but the English language hasn't got words enough to describe that jane. You know how pretty she looked in

that photo, David? Well, you can bank on it that that picture was a downright insult to her.

“Without trying to pin any yellow chrysanthemums on myself I’ll say I handled her tactfully. And finally I got her to talking after explaining that if she could give us the right of some of this chap’s peculiar actions in hiding out in another man’s place and so on, he’d be a good deal clearer of a murder charge than he is now.

“With that she r’ared up and pitched in and gave me the whole layout. Made me right jealous, too, for I’m thinking the lady has a bit of weakness for our friend right to this day.

“It seems that the G. R. A. on the ring stands for George Ransom Averyt of Mt. Prospect Avenue, Newark, New Jersey. He and she grew up together and were puppy love sweethearts, so when he graduated from Princeton and went into the stock-broking business they just naturally became engaged. She’s a Barnard grad.

“That engagement lasted for a year and then they had a serious talk and decided they’d made a mistake. She gave him back his ring—which she identified with more than a hint of tears in those Madonna eyes of hers,—and the engage-

ment was off, but they continued to be mighty good pals. And then, he, poor sucker, tried to get rich quick . . . and they stung him good and proper.

“I won’t go into all the details but I’ve got ’em at my fingertips. A bunch of capitalistic crooks used him as a come-on. If the deal went through he stood to win out fair and ordinary. If the authorities butted in, he was scheduled to hold the bag. And he held it. The thing went flooie right, and the worst of it is that from what she says the man was really just a poor boob who thought the whole proposition was on the level.

“When the big bust came they went to him and showed their hands. I understand that he messed up that directors’ room considerable with one or two of them, but it was no go. They had him dead to rights and he was wise enough to know it. But even then he didn’t stop being a fool. One of those whiskered Jesse Jameses offered to finance his getaway and he fell for it. Of course that was the last straw and when the bulls fell on the crowd the evidence all pointed to poor Averyt—or Heston—with the arch crook and the others as innocent investors.

"He got away. The girl says that they both knew Franklin Furness and that Furness had often described to them Furness Lodge. So there he hiked. He took the name of Heston arbitrarily. And she has the rest of it doped out just about right, I'm thinking; that he laid low there, hoping it would all blow over or they'd get the right guys or something and then he'd come back with a clean bill of health.

"Then that he got wind of some one coming down to the Lodge and cleared out. According to the girl neither of them have ever heard of Stanford Forrest and have only seen Mary Carmody on the vaudeville stage.

"So there's what I'd swear was the truth. And having a few hours to myself before my train left, I hopped the Tubes and went to a lawyer friend of ours at 120 Broadway and put the case before him. Regarding the jobbing proposition where they'd caught Averyt with the lather on his face. He took names and got busy. Says from the way the girl tells it he can jail the crowd and get Averyt off light for turning State's evidence. Of course I didn't make the break of telling him where he could find Averyt—trust your Uncle Dudley not to

spill all the beans; and of course he couldn't do anything if he wanted to without Averyt's help.

"So there you are, David. It doesn't clear the youngster of the charge of murder, but it does explain a heap of things; it tells what he was doing here, and why he was hiding out; it lets us know why he didn't have a word to say and denied everything; it lets us know that he's lived a pretty decent life, comes from good people, moved in first-rate society—and it shows that unless something cropped up within a few minutes at Furness Lodge, it's just about proof that he didn't have any motive for killing Mrs. Forrest. How does it strike you?"

The sheriff was staring at Sullivan admiringly. "Good Lord!" he ejaculated; "you Northerners work fast."

Carroll nodded his appreciation. "Dandy work, Jim. And of course you've handled everything just right. It just about removed every semblance of motive from Heston—or Averyt—unless, as you say, something cropped up at the Lodge and he struck at her suddenly . . . which, I'm free to confess, sounds mighty unlikely. The only thing I don't like is the re-

sult; if it clears Heston it leaves Stan Forrest in deeper than he ever has been. However," he rose, "let's toddle in and have a chat with Heston."

Heston—or Averyt—rose politely as they entered his cell. He was pale and dignified, and he listened attentively to Carroll's statement of fact regarding himself—

"Both you and Miss Devarney have accused me of working solely to trick you into an admission, Averyt," he finished. "That is, of course, ridiculous—although I'd rather see Forrest cleared than almost anything in the world.

"But we've got enough of your personal history to remove a motive for your crime . . . that is, unless something cropped up at the last minute, you had apparently no reason for killing Mrs. Forrest. Therefore, I'd like to beg of you to be honest with us. I'm not going to cross-question you; you can talk or not as you wish. About this stock-jobbing proposition, Sullivan assures me that you've been the fall guy and that they can clear your skirts entirely—save insofar as you'll be laughed at for being a simpleton in the business world."

"I'd stand that," grated Averyt, "if it would

give me the right to hold up my head again as an honest man."

"We have the story of the transaction pretty straight, haven't we?"

"Exactly. Katherine knows every detail as well as I do. If she was sufficiently impressed to tell you, I don't see that I should keep silent longer."

"So much for that. At best, facing that charge is a heap less bad than facing a South Carolina county jury accused of the murder of a pretty young girl. Do you care to tell us just what you did for the two days preceding the murder?"

Averyt rose, crossed his cell and stared out at the tall pines to southward. Finally he swung back and placed himself before Carroll. "I'll tell you the straight, unvarnished truth," he announced. "You can believe it or not, as you choose."

"Good."

"I had been safe at the Lodge for two or three months; I knew that Franklin Furness was hopelessly marooned in Denver and barring only a possible sale of the place, I felt that I was pretty safe from detection.

"That was until the afternoon of the eighth. At that time I had been out on the river in a rotten little flat-bottomed boat I have and when I landed and started up the slope I saw a big touring car in the grounds. You can't fancy how startled I was.

"I lay in hiding and watched. I saw the chauffeur—although it was not until later that I found out who it was—unloading the car and knew immediately that some one was coming there. I was quite sure that it was not Franklin Furness, so that evening after I was certain he had gone for the night, I entered the Lodge and investigated. There was enough marked stuff there to make me certain that a couple was coming there for a considerable period.

"In anticipation of just such a possibility as this, I had never put all of my things in the Lodge, but kept my trunk and most of my stuff at the cabin I had bought down near the bend. Also I had told Miss Devarney—to whom I have the honour to be engaged—that if ever she heard I had left the Lodge she would find me at the cabin."

"She knew your real name and your past!" interrupted Carroll.

"Certainly," answered Averyt with quiet dignity. "She wore that ring, by the way, on a ribbon around her neck, and several days before she had lost it at the Lodge where I presume you found it."

"In the dining room."

"Owing to the sword of Damocles hanging over my head we had never announced our engagement. I couldn't ask her father for her hand without giving my real name and that involved explanations which made his refusal a certainty. So we deemed it better to wait and see whether I would ever be cleared.

"On the evening of the eighth I walked to the village where Esther lives and discovered that she was in Charleston doing some shopping and was not due to return until the following afternoon. I left word with her folks that I wished to see her at the cabin. I learned later by the way, that they merely told her I wished to see her without saying 'at the cabin.' Our relations were open and above-board and her parents knew all along she visited me. Moreover, her brother, Porter, a twelve-year-old, came with her most of the time.

"At noon or a little while after that, on the

ninth, I was watching at the cabin and this strange couple . . . later, when I learned that the bride was Mary Carmody the erstwhile vaudeville actress, I remembered having seen her . . . appeared. I went back to my cabin and found Porter Devarney there. He and I fished for awhile and later, when I knew that the train from Charleston was in and that Esther would have had time to ride out from Karnak, I sent Porter to ask her to come and see me. He, too, delivered that message literally, never mentioning that I was at the cabin; a perfectly natural oversight.

"When he had gone I went out on the river for awhile in my bateau and lay there thinking. Then I saw her coming from the direction of the Lodge along a little path that skirts the river; she had not come along the road. I whistled to her and left the boat to join her.

"She said that she had thought I was at the Lodge and that no one had mentioned to her that there were people there. She had not known for herself, as she had been in Charleston. I told her about the folks and then we walked toward the road together. And, whether or not you believe it; that is the truth." He

gazed squarely into Carroll's eyes and to the detective came the belief that the man was speaking truly. In every detail his story agreed with that which Esther Devarney had told, save that she had asserted she learned of the occupation of Furness Lodge from a man driving an ox-team—quite evidently a falsehood told in the effort to shield him from any sort of suspicion.

Orrin Kinney, the jailer, walked up the stairs, rattling his big bunch of iron keys. "Sheriff," he said, "there's some folks would like to see you."

"Who?"

"The Devarneys—all of them." Then, he added, in explanation: "Seth Devarney's crowd."

Averyt's face flushed. He glanced beseechingly at the sheriff, and Potter nodded. "Send 'em up, Orrin."

And up they came, in the wake of Peter Royce, clerk of the court, and the skinny little probate judge. Potter opened the cell door, and quite frankly and without the slightest trace of embarrassment the girl went to Averyt and put up

her lips to him. He touched them reverently with his own.

The girl turned toward the others, head back and eyes shining. Her hand tightly clasped both of Averyt's.

"With your permission, Sheriff Potter," she said quietly, "Mr. Royce will perform the marriage ceremony for us!"

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR an instant there was silence; silence broken only by the singing of a few negroes in the street, the put-putting of an automobile, the labouring of a freight engine shunting cars down by the depot. Averyt was the first to speak, and he spoke in protest—

“No, dear, I can’t let you do that. I can’t.”

“You must,” she proclaimed imperiously. “I have brought my family as proof that it is done with their consent.”

“But they—do you know . . . ?”

“Your name?” She smiled. “I told them.”

Carroll stepped forward. “I think you’ll all be delighted to know,” he said, “that Mr. Averyt—whom you know as Heston—has been labouring under a misapprehension which will soon be cleared up. He’s told us the whole story,” he said, turning to the girl, “and we found out a good bit for ourselves. That little deal in the North—you know what I mean?”

“Yes.”

"Will undoubtedly work out all right. It may provide him with a little unpleasant notoriety, but that's about all. There's a small chance that he won't get by with clear skirts."

Averyt turned a haggard face to the girl. "That's not the reason I refuse, Esther. It's this other thing—this rotten murder charge against me. I can't prove that I didn't do it. It's my word for it, and they know that if I was guilty I'd lie anyway."

"I told them the truth," she said, "and Mr. Carroll knows it."

"And by gosh!" interrupted Porter Devarney, "I was a-tellin' him that you couldn't of done it, Mr. Heston—I mean Mr. Averyt. If he don't believe all of us then all I say is I ain't got so much use f'r a regalar deteckative."

Carroll laughed. "Not even after I fixed your rifle?"

"Huh! Mr. Hes—Averyt—could of fixed it easier than you."

"And you will marry me, dear," pleaded the girl. "You will, and—"

He shook his head. "Not while this charge is hanging over me. I couldn't—"

Carroll winked portentously at the sheriff. "You're really willing to take a chance, Miss Esther?"

"I'm proud to."

He turned to Averyt. "I'd advise you to marry her while she's willing, Averyt. It isn't every day that—"

Averyt's teeth clicked sharply. "I'll not permit the sacrifice so long as there is any suspicion of murder against me."

"But if you were cleared?"

"If I was. . . ." The man's face lighted. "I think the question answers itself."

Carroll turned back to the girl. "You have the license, Miss Esther?"

"Yes. And I secured it from the probate judge."

"And you can perform the service, Mr. Royce?"

The clerk of court bustled forward officiously. "I have performed more marriage ceremonies than any man in Karnak County and—"

"Then add another to your list," smiled the detective.

"I won't!" blazed Averyt. "Not until I'm clear—"

"I understand," said Carroll, softly. "That's why I told him to go ahead!"

Averyt inbreathed sharply. He started forward: "You mean—you mean that—"

"That you are innocent? Certainly I do." Carroll's tone was matter-of-fact. "I assure you, Averyt, I'd never stay to see the ceremony if I were not sure. And now I'd be honoured to be designated best man."

The eyes of the girl filled with tears. For the first time since making her acquaintance she showed the full femininity of her strong woman nature. "Mr. Carroll . . . you are sure. . . ."

"As nearly sure as I will ever be of anything, Miss Esther. That other little matter, of course. . . ."

And there in the musty corridor of the red-brick jail, George Ransom Averyt and Esther Devarney were united in marriage.

It was a strange wedding; the young man from the North as groom; the magnificent girl of the Southern swamps as the bride; her leathern parents as witnesses . . . and to one side the Sheriff, the wizened probate judge and the two detectives who had sought to fasten the crime of murder on the shoulders of the man

who pronounced the "I do" in a voice which trembled with emotion of which he was frankly unashamed.

Orrin Kinney appeared at the head of the stone steps to witness the ceremony and with him was Camilla Robinson, the stenographer to the clerk of court. The young couple stared with wide eyes and Kinney spoke pleadingly into the girl's ear. She nodded her head . . . then turned away. . . .

"I pronounce you man and wife. . . ." The words rolled sonorously from the lips of Peter Boyce. George Averyt and his wife turned to stare into one another's eyes. Carroll turned away abruptly. Just so had Stanford Forrest gazed into the eyes of Mary Carmody less than ten days before. As from a distance he heard the voice of Seth Devarney.

"I take it ye was honest, Mr. Carroll—'bout him not bein' guilty of—of—killin'. . . ."

The detective summoned a smile. "Yes, I was honest. If Sheriff Potter is willing he may go free—go with my apologies for having caused him this inconvenience. There were so many things I didn't understand which I had to know. And when you bore out my suspicions by trying

to make your getaway from Karnak that night. . . ."

"I didn't know then that I was suspected of the murder," said Averyt, promptly. "I thought you might have been after me for—for that other thing."

"I realize that now. And as to that charge, my friend, I'd advise that you and your wife wait in Karnak until I return North. Go there with us and place yourself in the hands of my lawyer friend in New York who will lay the matter before the District Attorney. I think I can promise you that you'll pull out of that all right. Especially if you are willing to tell the whole truth."

"Willing? I'd face inferno itself to get a good night's rest; a sleep not studded with horrible dreams. . . . But tell me, what brought you to the conclusion that I did not kill her?"

"A dozen things," came Carroll's slow answer. "I don't think I'd better go into details yet. You see, we haven't yet arrested the person who *did* do it."

"One never *knows*," came the Delphic answer.

Orrin Kinney, clasping the hand of the furi-

ously blushing Camilla Robinson, tapped Peter Royce on the arm. "I say, Mr. Royce, how 'bout tryin' that there ceremony on us an' sort of seein' if 'twell take?"

"What's that? What's that?" spluttered the clerk. "You wish to marry Camilla?"

"Yes, sir—I kind of thought so."

"You wish, Orrin, to rob me of my stenographer?"

"She wouldn't quit work right off, would you, Camilla? Not 'twell he got another stenographer anyway? Would you now?"

"No," answered the prospective bride, "I couldn't go an' do nothin' like that."

"Well, well. You really wish to marry him, Camilla?"

"I—I—guess I do, sir."

Peter Royce sighed resignedly. "Very well." He turned to the probate judge. "Run down and fill out a license for 'em, Judge."

"Never mind, Judge," said Camilla. "I sort of went in your office an' filled it out my own self. All you got to do is just sign it."

The license was signed by the Judge and for the second time in ten minutes Peter Royce united a couple in the holy bonds of matrimony.

But at the conclusion of the second there was no soul-gazing. Orrin Kinney, with true appreciation, clasped his bride to him and impressed a kiss upon her lips which echoed through the grim corridor.

And then the meeting adjourned. The Devarneys went into the swamp as the guests of Carroll in Forrest's car, driven by Robert Carter. Averyt and his bride accompanied them with the idea of returning and catching the night train for a brief honeymoon in Charleston; pledging their words to Carroll to return on the second day following. Orrin Kinney and his wife quit work for the day and sallied brazenly forth into the street to spread the glad tidings. And Carroll, Sullivan and Sheriff Potter closeted themselves in the sheriff's office, after sending the pompous Peter Royce to Simpson's Drug Store, there to retail to the gossip club his multifold glories as a specialist in abnormal matrimony.

The three men in the sheriff's office gazed at one another and it was the sheriff who spoke.

"Guess you know your business, Carroll, but what you did up there was a knockout."

"Freeing Averyt?"

"Yes."

"There wasn't any reason to hold him. I'm convinced that he is not guilty."

"Then who is?" exploded Potter pertinently.

"Freeing Averyt didn't surprise me so much," broke in Jim Sullivan, "I was frankly surprised to see you turn the girl loose."

"Why?"

"Because—while I didn't want to believe it—she looked like the best bet to me."

"Because she admitted being there just before the crime was committed?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think she would have denied that fact had she been implicated in the murder; provided we accept as a premise that she was not lying to shield Averyt?"

"Perhaps—but you remember the Fanshaw case up in Berkley City, don't you?"

"Yes—I remember that. Another thing: what motive could the girl have had?"

"I thought of that too," exclaimed Sullivan. "She admits that she has been deeply in love with Averyt. She knew that there had been another woman in his life. She did not know that the Lodge was occupied.

"Let us presume then that Forrest's story of his wife's doings that afternoon were strictly true. Mrs. Forrest returned to the house and was at the ice-box. Miss Devarney goes there and in the dusk—it must have been dusk—sees a city woman ruling over the ménage. We know that she had a fiery temper. What more motive did she need to strike? . . ."

Carroll nodded. "True enough, Jim. But would she then have sought Averyt at his other cabin?"

Sullivan threw his arms wide with a hopeless gesture. "Lord knows whether she would or not. The case is beyond me—I'm in way over my depth. I don't want to believe she did it, in fact I *don't* believe it; but it struck me that there was a possibility that she could have done it."

"Very accurate conclusion, Jim. And you, Sheriff, what do you think?"

Potter turned a serious face to Carroll. "I think," he said bluntly, "that it looks devilish dark for Stanford Forrest."

Sullivan flashed a quick glance at Carroll. The face of the detective was bland—impassive. "Don't you?" persisted Potter.

"Circumstantially—yes. But I've never ceased to believe him innocent."

"Yet you've turned loose every possible suspect; turned 'em loose or cleared 'em. And somebody murdered Mrs. Forrest."

"Yes," agreed Carroll slowly, "somebody did."

He rose and walked to the window overlooking the street. It was thick with dust. Far off he could see the great fields of cotton—huge brown areas spotted with white where the pickers had slurred their task. The local freight had been made up and was puffing and panting northward, blowing stridently for the trestle. Carroll lighted a cigarette and blew the smoke rings against the pane. Finally he smiled slightly and turned toward the others.

"Here comes Mart Farnam and he's evidently out for b'ar. Bet even money Peter Royce sought him out and broke the news."

They heard Farnam's heavy step on the veranda, then the door was flung back and the lanky swamp angel stepped into the room. He glared balefully at Carroll—

"What's all this I be'n a-hearin'?" he demanded.

"About what?"

"Lettin' Heston loose?"

"Yes—we released him."

"My Gawd! Are ye crazy—plumb crazy?"

"I don't think so."

"Ye mean ye don't think he killed her—that he killed Mrs. Forrest?"

"No—I don't think so."

"But you was tellin' me only t'other day—"

"I did think he killed her. But I don't think so any more."

"But—but *somebody* did!"

"Yes—somebody did."

"Then if he didn't, who did?" flashed Farnam.

A hint of steel crept into Carroll's voice. But his reply came in a low, level tone.

"*You did!*"

CHAPTER XIX

A GRAY pallor crept slowly over the face of Mart Farnam; his hands clenched and unclenched spasmodically; his eyes widened and a look of infinite terror dawned in them. He gazed upon Carroll as though upon the superhuman. His knees trembled and he clutched the edge of the table for support.

Sullivan caught Carroll's eyes and moved unostentatiously across the room. He closed and locked both doors and put the keys in his pocket. Then he returned and took a position near the elongated swamp angel.

Farnam was trembling violently—beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He glanced helplessly toward Carroll and hopelessly toward the locked doors.

But he was no more surprised than was Sheriff Potter. That dignitary was staring pop-eyed at Carroll. As for the detective the boyish softness had disappeared from his face as though by magic. The mildly inquiring gaze of his quiet blue eyes had hardened to steely

gray, every muscle of his lithe figure was tensed. He breathed with difficulty, the inhalations making a dull, sobbing sound in his throat. Sullivan waited quietly; watchful of any move on the part of the cornered prey.

The bolt had fallen from the blue. Throughout the case Jim Sullivan had rather pitied Carroll whose personal interest seemed to have warped a usually sober judgment and analytic genius. He had seen his superior apparently blind himself to the possibility that Stanford Forrest, the man against whom the evidence most strongly pointed, was guilty.

To Jim Sullivan the removal of the cloud from the shoulders of Averyt had incontrovertibly fastened the stigma of guilt upon Forrest. From the first he had considered no other person; save possibly Esther Devarney, and for a brief period of time—Robert Carter, the chauffeur.

And now, quite suddenly and casually, as was David Carroll's way, he had bluntly accused Mart Farnam of the crime. Of one thing Jim Sullivan was sure. He was sure that Mart Farnam had murdered Mary Forrest. He didn't know why, but he could not understand

how Carroll had discovered it . . . but he had been associated with Carroll for years and he knew that he never accused wrongly.

Something of the menace in Carroll's unwavering eyes was communicated to Farnam. In the light of the steady stare he wilted to a chair where he sat nervously, staring at his nemesis. And as Carroll did not speak the accused man licked dry lips and muttered—

“Thet's a lie!”

But his tone did not carry conviction. His protestation was as weak as it was belated.

“It's the truth!” Carroll's close-clipped words cut incisively through the pregnant atmosphere of the dingy room. “You killed Mary Forrest!”

“It's a lie, I tell ye! I had nothing ag'in Mary Forrest!”

“You won't confess?”

Farnam's voice rose shrilly; broke—“I didn't kill her. I wasn't near thar. I ain't got nothin' to confess.”

The tenseness went suddenly from Carroll's posture. He allowed his muscles to relax. But his eyes never left the pallid face of the accused man.

"How do you know?" It was Sheriff Potter speaking. He scraped his feet nervously on the floor. "How do you know, Carroll?"

"By a dozen different ways, Sheriff. I'd rather that he confess—"

"I didn't do it! I didn't do it!" Farnam's voice came in a weak, unconvincing moan. "I swear t' Gawd I didn't kill her."

"Tell us how you know?" begged Potter.

"Well. . . ." Carroll hitched his chair forward. His eyes bored unwaveringly into those of Mart Farnam: "I'll admit that from the beginning I was biased. I started my investigation with the premise that Stanford Forrest was innocent. You had the same hunch, Sheriff, so you can understand my feelings; I who grew up with him and was closer to him than a brother could ever have been.

"A crime investigation is, after all, nothing but a mass of false scents. But it is a grave mistake to presuppose that an obviously false trail is useless. That such is not the case was never more clearly proven than in this very crime.

"My idea has always been that to understand a crime, the investigator must put himself as

closely in touch with the circumstances surrounding the crime itself as it is possible for him to do. In other words, I try to understand the psychic condition of my suspects at the time of the commission of the crime. Therefore, there is no detail concerning the lives of the *dramatis personæ* which does not interest me. In this case it has led me to what I am firmly convinced is the correct solution.

“When I arrived in Karnak I knew nothing of the crime. I knew nothing of the place. And after talking with Stanford Forrest for three minutes I would have staked my life that he was innocent. But innocence and proof of innocence are different things. Circumstances were against him, and I was almost afraid of the task that confronted me.

“In the early hours of the investigation, Jim Sullivan had occasion to chide me a bit. I took it all cheerfully; almost pitifully eager for his view of things. I was working with two pair of keen eyes and two agile brains; Jim’s and mine. That his conclusions were wrong and mine right—as I now believe—is due to luck and nothing more. No, Jim—don’t shake your head. You saw the same things I saw but your

mind had started off in other directions and you didn't get their correct valuation as circumstances bearing on the case.

"When I had talked with Stan and found out about the letter—proving by its postmark that Bennet Hemingway could have been in Karnak on the ninth . . . because he was in Columbia on the eighth—I confess that I hoped that was the right scent. But later Hemingway was easily disposed of. In seeking to convict him I established for him as perfect an alibi as I have ever run across; an alibi written large and unmistakably on the registers of three hotels.

"So much for Bennet Hemingway. Carter was automatically cleared when Miss Esther admitted that she had approached the Lodge from the road before the commission of the murder. Sullivan's idea, Sheriff, had been that Carter might have returned from Karnak, killed Mrs. Forrest, hidden in the woods until the arrival of Mr. Forrest and then entered the house. Had that been the case Miss Esther would have seen him.

"An investigation of the scene of the crime indicated to me that either Carter and Forrest both lied on the same point or else Stan was

innocent. For the man who committed that crime approached the Lodge from the rear—that is from the road through the shrubbery and not up the main walk—and he ran after the crime was committed. Carter tells us that he found Forrest with the body, and it was therefore impossible that he had run. Besides, the footprints we found were those of a brogan and not of a small slender shoe such as that worn by Forrest. Or Averyt, for that matter.

“But that finding in itself was far from sufficient to clear Stanford. Negative evidence has very little weight with any jury. With such jury as I knew he would face, it would have no weight at all. It was incumbent upon me to find the criminal, discover his motive, and prove the crime.

“The discovery of a mysterious man who had poached upon another’s preserves, fooled me for a considerable time and completely blinded me to the importance of certain clues which might otherwise have helped me solve the matter sooner. Here, I thought, is a crook hiding out or a convict escaped. Either theory seemed to supply a motive irrespective of possible personal acquaintance.

"But when, added to all that, I realized that his brazenness of possessing signified an acquaintance with Franklin Furness, and at least a vicarious one with Stanford and his bride; I became more than ever convinced that my stranger was mixed up in the murder.

"You both know the details of my search for Averyt. You know that I frankly suspected him of the crime. But the motive that went with it was never strong enough to satisfy me. However, it was not until the other day when I accidentally ran across Porter Devarney, Esther's brother, that I became fairly well convinced of his innocence.

"Porter told me that he had been with Averyt at a time when it would have been virtually a physical impossibility for him to have gone to the Lodge, committed the murder and have returned in time to have met Esther Devarney at the Lodge. There was only one way he could have effected that miracle of transportation and that was via the river. But there is a strong downstream current in the Santee; and one view of his flat-bottomed boat convinced me that he was not mixed up in the murder itself. At least it put me in a state of mind

to believe anything tending to prove his innocence.

"Then Jim Sullivan returned from Newark with a story which shows that Averyt had been a simple come-on with a gang of arch-crooks. And, while my reasoning on this point may be fallacious, I don't believe any one who had been as simple-minded as Averyt in that stock-jobbing deal could have planned and executed what must have been an exceedingly clever and horribly cold-blooded murder . . . provided I was still willing to believe that he did it. Not that Farnam, there, killed premeditatedly; but it would have had to be prearranged by Averyt for him to have done it.

"Sullivan's story was a clincher, too, in a totally different way. It proved to me that Averyt was not of a criminal trend psychologically. In brief, all of that, connected with the footprint clue, convinced me that Averyt was not my man. Especially since that very day, through Porter Devarney, I became convinced for the first time that Mart Farnam was guilty!

"Farnam puzzled me. There was no motive for his commission of the crime, and men do not murder for the fun of the thing unless they

are affected with homicidal mania; of which Farnam is patently not a victim. But once a chance remark dropped by Porter Devarney put the idea of Farnam in my mind, the rest became fairly clear; and I merely awaited substantiation before arresting him.

“I can thank Porter Devarney for his sister’s happiness and the establishment of Stanford Forrest’s innocence; and this is what he said—

“In discussing the case with him, he mentioned that he had come from Averyt—whom he called Heston—with a message to his sister. Averyt wanted to see her. He says he met Esther on the road walking toward the cabin and presuming that she knew he was at the cabin, he did not mention to her that there were strangers at the Lodge and she subsequently went there.

“But the telling point that Porter makes was his statement that he walked farther down the road toward the village where his folks and Mart Farnam live, and that he was walking in the woods hoping to get a shot at some sparrows. And he said quite naïvely that he saw Mart Farnam—*walking toward the Lodge!*

“His casual statement was so vital that it

made me gasp. For several days before, Esther Devarney mentioned that while she was on her way to the Lodge she met Mart Farnam walking *away* from the Lodge. His own statement substantiated that. He said that he had been at a place called Nixon's Cross Roads drinking moonshine liquor. He also said that he went straight on home, which statement was given the lie by young Devarney's remark that Farnam had turned around.

"In brief—Farnam had met the girl, waited until she had gone a considerable distance, and had then turned to follow her!

"Both he and the girl admitted that they had quarrelled more or less when they met on the road. They both said that he was drunk. Therefore, there must have been some sinister motive in his trailing of her . . . but most important of all, if he followed her and she went to the Lodge, he too, must have gone to the Lodge!

"And having once convinced myself that Mart Farnam had gone back to the Lodge on the evening of the ninth, I remembered that he had lied about it. And no man lies about a thing like that unless he has something to conceal.

"Mart Farnam once involved, in my mind, it didn't take me long to remember purely physical clues which I had noted more or less subconsciously and stored away for future reference.

"For instance: the footprints. Sullivan will remember that the footprints were large—bro-gans. Also that the shoes which made them were run down at the heel. You may look at Farnam's shoes yourself; you can see the answer to that.

"More, I had noticed at first, and I noticed again later that Farnam's shoes had two red splotches. Looked like clay at first. But those splotches were made by blood as the body of the dead woman slid to the floor. He hadn't noticed them. He ran from the house and his shoes became pretty well covered with dust. And he would never have looked for blood on his shoes unless it had been flagrant. He has the same shoes on now—the spots are plain; if you look for them.

"Now then you will remember, Jim, that the day Farnam drove us out to the place he drove with his right hand entirely. Scarcely used his left. The third and fourth fingers of his left

hand were badly bruised. The fingernails were blackened and looked very ugly.

"That did not strike me as significant until after I suspected him. But the bruised fingers became mighty relevant then.

"The way the crime happened was this: Mrs. Forrest had gone to the ice-box, she was bending over it and holding it open. She was struck from behind by Farnam. She fell. But he, before he struck, had braced himself by grasping the edge of the chest with his left hand.

"As Mary fell she let the cover to the ice-box fall. It smashed the two fingers of Farnam's left hand. Which explains that part of it.

"Now for the next. You will notice that there are still traces over Farnam's right eye of a long, vertical bruise. Memory of that bruise comes back to me in a flood after I once suspected him. The explanation of it is simple.

"You will remember, Jim, that I made you rehearse the crime with me. And that as you were supposed to fall—simulating Mrs. Forrest—I turned swiftly, in supposed terror, grabbed the screen door open. . . .

"And the chances are ninety-nine out of a hundred that a man in such circumstances and

in such a hurry would slam himself on the forehead with the screen door. He would run right into it. Try it for yourself some time, Sheriff; and you'll understand.

"That was what Farnam had tried to do. The door had struck him a hard blow on the forehead; hard enough to leave that mark of which traces still remain.

"But there is one clue which is more important than all the others. Jim will recall that when the ice-box top fell it smashed a bottle of imported olive oil which had evidently been taken out by Mrs. Forrest and placed on the ledge. The falling cover which smashed Mart's hand also smashed that bottle of olive oil.

"The oil was spattered for a considerable distance. It is a heavy substance and spurted out in large blots. Now then, in substantiation of my contention that Farnam was standing at the ice-box gripping it with his left hand you will see—" He rose, strode across to Farnam and lifted the long left arm above the man's head.

"There!" he said. And his finger pointed to the large greasy splotch under the left armpit which he had noticed the day he arrived in Karnak.

“That, to me, was deciding proof. It verified my other findings. The broken bottle had squirted the oil out and some of it struck that shirt. More; it is a substance which you will not find in the cabins through the swamps. I doubt if there is a store in all of Karnak County which handles genuine olive oil.

“Had Farnam been a little more of a Beau Brummel in his habits, he might not have worn that shirt so long without washing it. But it being flannel, I suppose is on until Christmas at any rate. But there you have the oil . . . which, taken by itself, would be almost sufficient to convict; and taken in conjunction with the rest of what I have told you . . . cannot do less than send him to the electric chair.

“But even with all of that I was still without a motive for the crime. I was not willing to believe that Mart Farnam went to the Lodge and killed a strange woman by way of pastime. Nor could I discover any possible motive for her killing by him.

“But I was convinced that he had killed her. Furthermore, that he had killed her suddenly; that he had gone to the house, drunk, perhaps, without any definite idea of committing murder.

"He, himself, said that he did not know there were strangers at the Lodge. Yet he killed a woman there, and he must have struck instantly as he entered the screen door to the back porch. Why, then, would he kill this strange woman?

"And the answer came to me after careful thought:—*He killed Mary Forrest without knowing that it was Mary Forrest!*

"That conclusion was inevitable, and once I had convinced myself of the fact the rest came more readily. I knew that Mart Farnam was deeply in love with Esther Devarney. I knew that she had rejected him in favour of George Averyt. I knew, from Farnam's own lips, that he truly suspected that their relations were not of the kind to have stood the glare of the spotlight. The belief was absurd, of course, and could have emanated from no mind but the warped one of Farnam. But I will do him the justice of saying that I believe he thought it.

"He did not know that the Lodge was occupied; certainly he did not know that there was a woman there. He had been at Nixon's drinking—and as he himself said, drinking heavily. His own words were: 'I licker whenever I git a good squar' chanest!'

“In brief, he walked from Nixon’s toward his home—more or less drunk. He met the girl. He asked her to throw Averyt aside and marry him. She refused. She probably refused too curtly. He imagined, and correctly, that she was going to meet her lover.

“Such circumstances give rise to passion which will commit murder. He followed her—followed craftily. Porter Devarney saw him going in the same direction that the girl had taken. And Farnam followed her to the Lodge.

“He thought that Averyt was still living there. He saw the girl enter the Lodge. He waited. But the girl found the Lodge empty. That was the time—in the gray dusk of the evening when figures are dim at the Lodge and almost indistinguishable—that Mary Forrest had gone down to the river to speak to her husband.

“Esther Devarney found the house occupied. She walked the length of the dog-trot, across the veranda and out of the front toward the cabin along the river path. She could scarcely have been more than out of sight when Mary Forrest returned to finish her salad dressing.

"The drunk and impassioned Farnam, his worst suspicions apparently proven, saw a woman whom he thought was Esther, engaged in the domestic task of fixing dinner for the man whom he most hated. Believe me when I say that men have committed murder for less.

"The rest is simple. He crossed the grounds, blinded with the murder lust; he flung open the screen door. The ice-pick was handy on the table. He seized it and struck—struck to kill—thinking that he was killing Esther Devarney."

"And then he saw his mistake. He sobered on the instant. He grabbed the screen door, injured his forehead. He ran from the Lodge. He went home."

Carroll finished speaking. There was an oppressive silence in the room. A silence broken only by the laboured breathing of Mart Farnam. And it was Mart Farnam who spoke; terror of the future in his whining voice—

"I didn't go for to kill her. . . . I didn't go for to kill her. . . ."

Carroll rose. He looked drawn and tired.

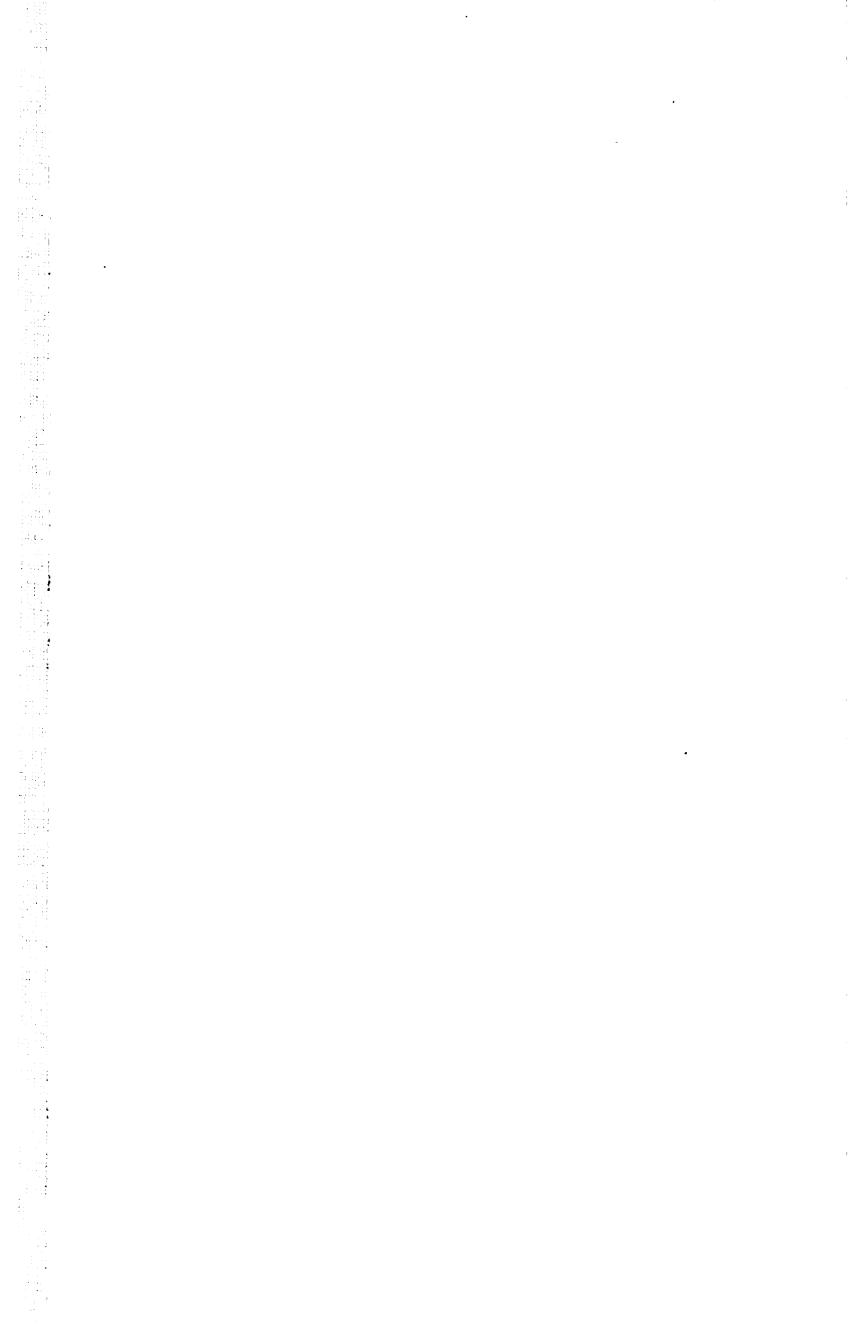
"I'd be obliged, Sheriff, if you'd turn Stanford Forrest out. He's suffered a good deal. . . ."

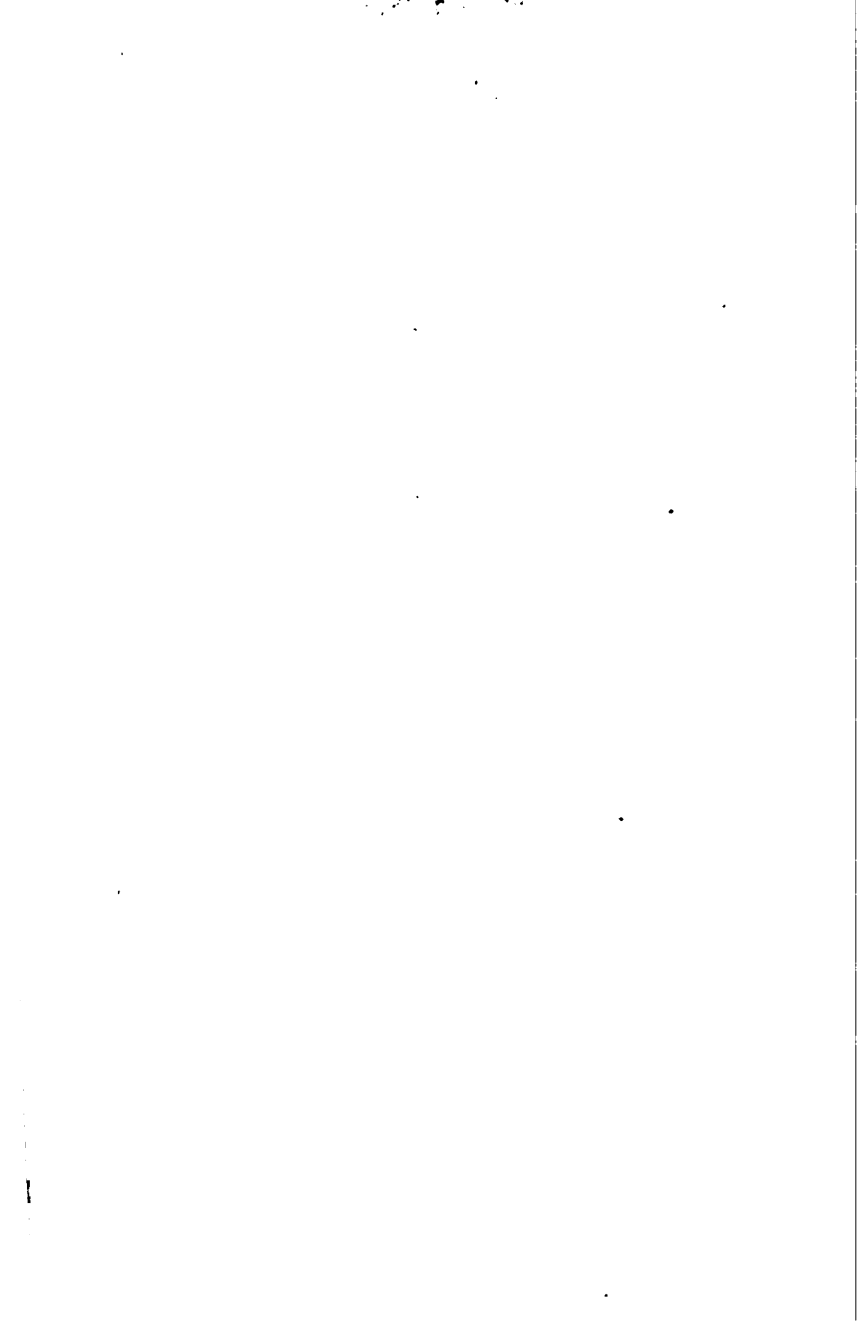
Potter tossed him the key to Forrest's cell.
"Let him out yourself, son. You've earned that
pleasure."

THE END

KS
JL







SEP 18 1928

